Story of

Maharaja Ranjit Singh

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Story of
Maharaja Ranjit Singh

by
Dr. Gobind Singh Mansukhani

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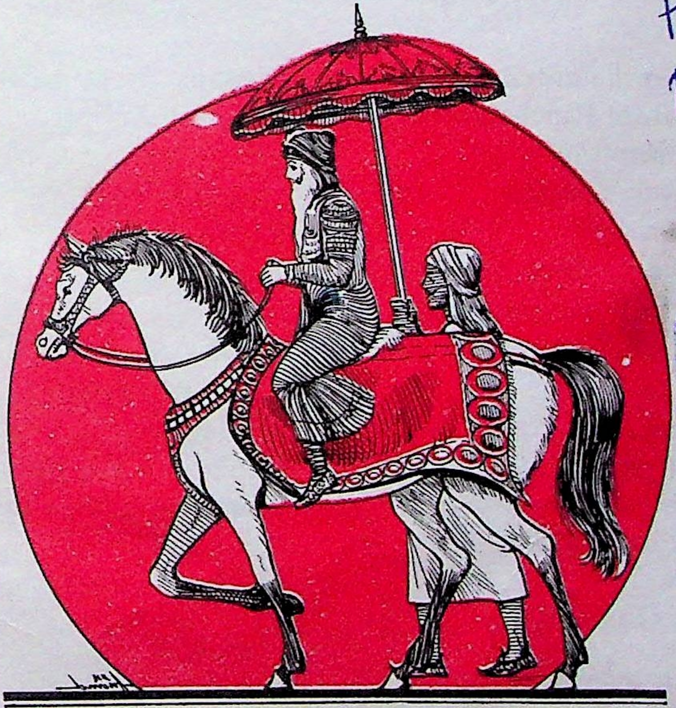

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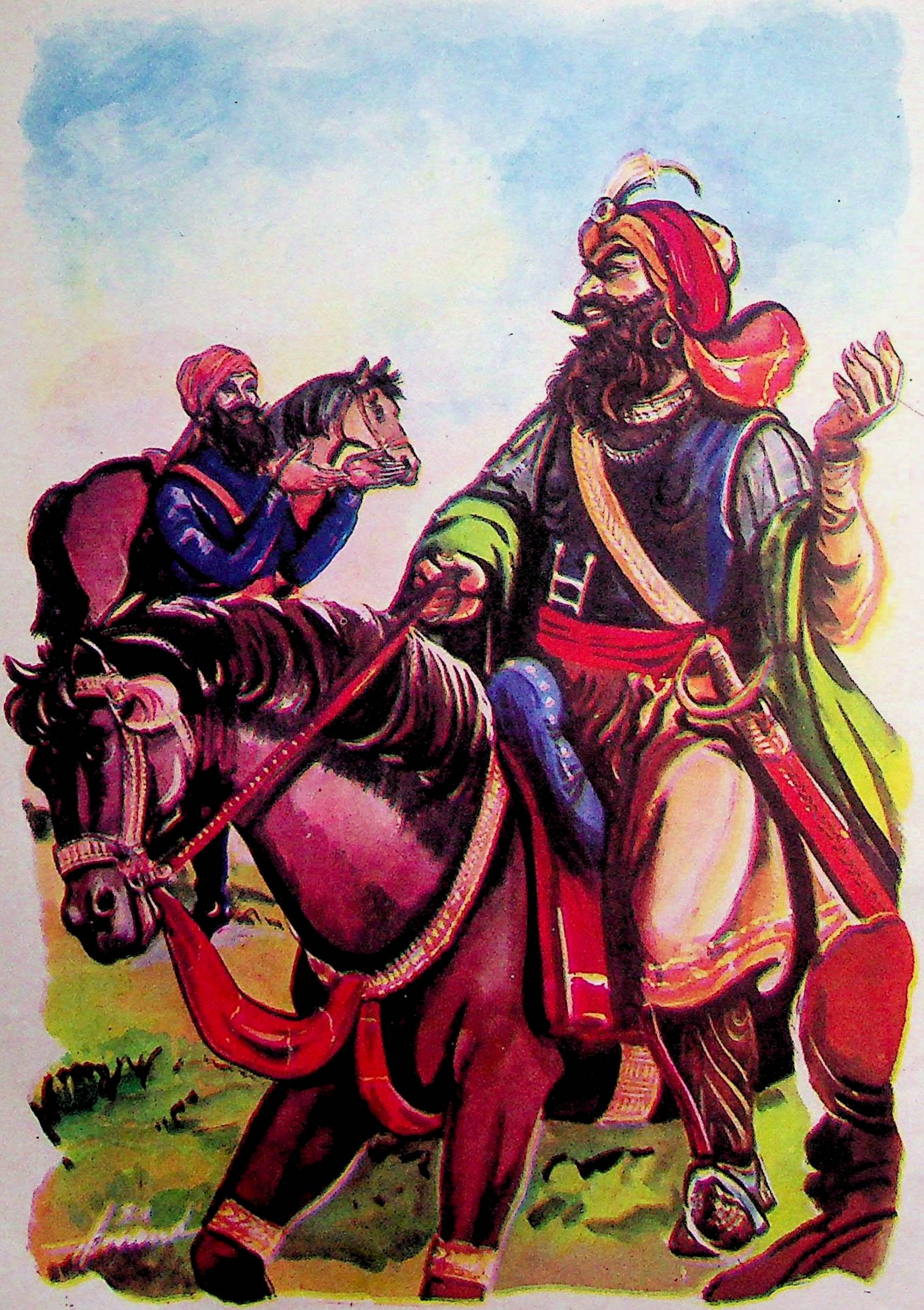


A Star is Born

More than 200 years ago, there lived in Gujranwala in the Punjab, a Sikh warrior and chieftain called Mahan Singh. He originally belonged to sukerchak village and therefore he was called the leader of the Sukerchakia community. He built a fortress in Gujranwala for the protection of his family and troops. One night he spoke to his wife, named Raj Kaur about his keen desire to have a son to look after his territories. Little did he dream that after some time he would be blessed with a son who would in course of time be crowned as the king of the Punjab and would change the map of Northern India.

In those troubled times, most of the petty rulers of parts of the Punjab oppressed the people. One of such tyrant rulers was the Muslim Nawab of Rasul Nagar. He treated his non-Muslim subjects with cruelty. They complained to Sardar Mahan Singh who made preparations for an attack on Rasul Nagar. At the head of his 6000 soldiers, Mahan Singh marched towards the place of the enemy. The Nawab panicked and shut himself up in his fort. Mahan Singh besieged the fort for many months and ultimately captured it. The citizens welcomed him as their liberator. He gave a new name to the city. It was thereafter called Ram Nagar.

As Mahan Singh was riding back in triumph to his village in the winter of 1780 (13th November), he saw a Sikh rider galloping towards him. The rider stopped and touching the Sardar's feet said, "Sir, I am coming from your wife's village with a message. But promise me a fitting reward before I break the news to you." Mahan Singh replied, "Well, I shall give you a handful of gold coins if you deliver the message at once." The messenger smiled and replied, "Sir, You are extremely lucky. God has blessed you with a son today!" Mahan Singh conveyed the good news to his victorious army which raised shouts of joy. With great humility, the warrior offered a prayer of thanks-giving to God for this priceless gift.

Thereafter Mahan Singh called the messenger and asked, "What is the name of the child?" Quick came the reply, "Sir, he has been named Budh Singh—which means the wise one." Mahan Singh thought for a moment and said, "Well, after this great victory my son shall be called Ranjit Singh—the victor of battles." The rider collecting the gold coins said, "Thank you, Sir. I shall ride back and tell your family that the new born shall be called Ranjit Singh as desired by you."

Mahan Singh could hardly contain himself with joy. He distributed gifts to his soldiers. When he reached home, he had a good look at the baby. He cheered his wife and said, "God be praised for giving me a successor who will perpetuate my name and look after my territories. I shall do my best to make him a worthy ruler of my people."

Princely Training

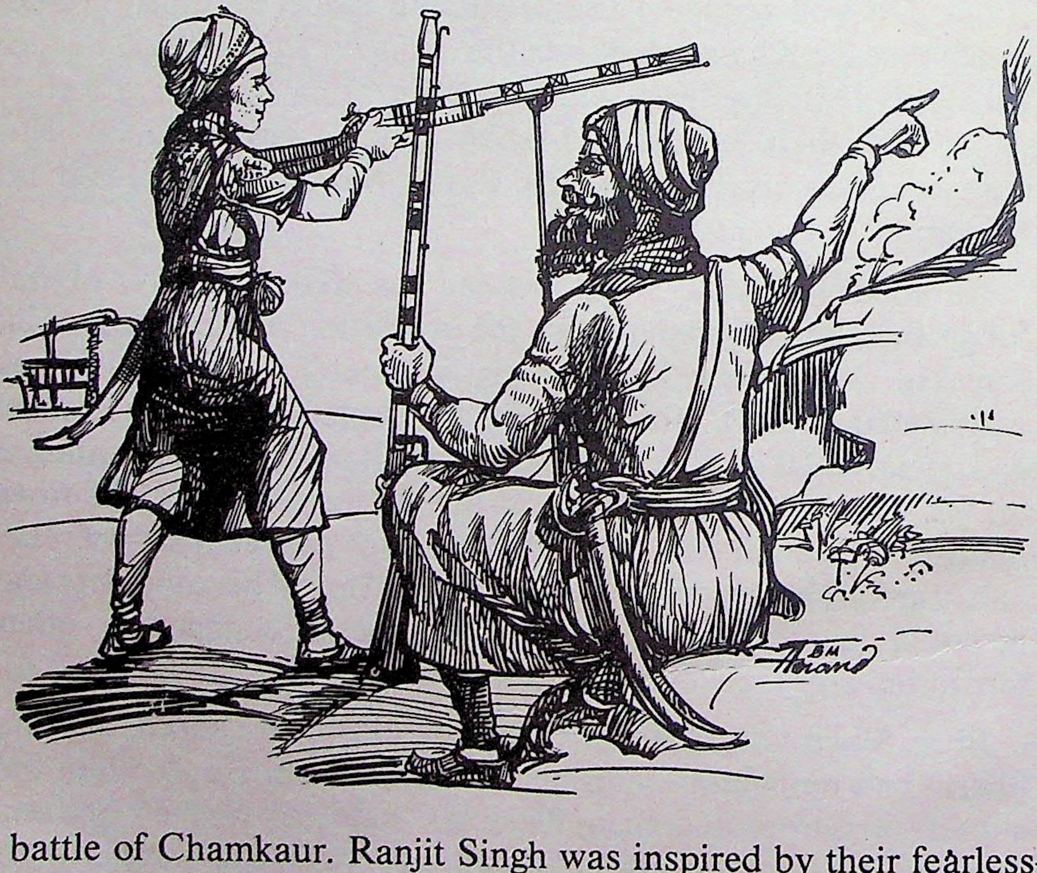
While an infant, Ranjit Singh suffered from a severe attack of small-pox. His body was full of blisters and red spots. His parents prayed for his recovery. His condition improved but his face was covered with permanent marks and he also lost his left eye. His mother Raj Kaur lamented over her son's disfigurement. Mahan Singh consoled her, saying, "Well, it is God's will. The child has recovered and I feel confident that what he has lost in his looks will be compensated by feats of courage and heroism in the years to come. Do you recollect the prediction made by Guru Gobind Singh that the Khalsa shall rule the country? May be that our son will fulfil that prophesy and hopefully bring the entire Punjab under the Sikh banner." Mahan Singh's expectations were realised after his death, when Ranjit Singh was declared the Maharaja of the Punjab.

As soon as Ranjit Singh crossed his sixth birthday, Mahan Singh thought of arranging for the education and training of his son. He called Bhai Bhag Singh, a capable local teacher and entrusted the child to him. Bhag Singh felt proud of this assignment and declared, "I shall do my best to train Ranjit Singh according to the tradition of the Sikh Gurus so that in due course he will prove himself to be an ideal ruler." Mahan Singh heaved a sigh of relief because a great responsibility had been taken off his shoulders and he could devote himself solely to the task of conquering other territories and their consolidation.

Bhag Singh taught Ranjit Singh the Gurmukhi script, and the liberal and humanitarian principles of Sikhism. He told him the stories of Gurus and their disciples and also of their selfless services and sacrifices. Ranjit Singh was deeply impressed by the daring exploits of Sikh soldiers who had died fighting against the

Mughal tyrants. He wanted to emulate their examples when he grew up.

After a couple of years, Mahan Singh assigned the duty of training Ranjit Singh in the martial arts to Amir Singh. Amir Singh, a capable soldier, accepted the task and said, "I shall teach the boy swimming, riding, swordsmanship and military strategy. I hope in due course he will be able to lead his army to battle." Ranjit Singh liked active life. He took keen interest in military tactics and neglected his studies. After a few months he became a champion swimmer, a fine horseman and an able swordsman. One day Amir Singh told Ranjit Singh the story of the two sons of Guru Gobind Singh who in their teens had sacrificed their lives in the battle of Chamkaur. Ranjit Singh was inspired by their fearlessness and said to Amir Singh, "I wish I get a similar opportunity to



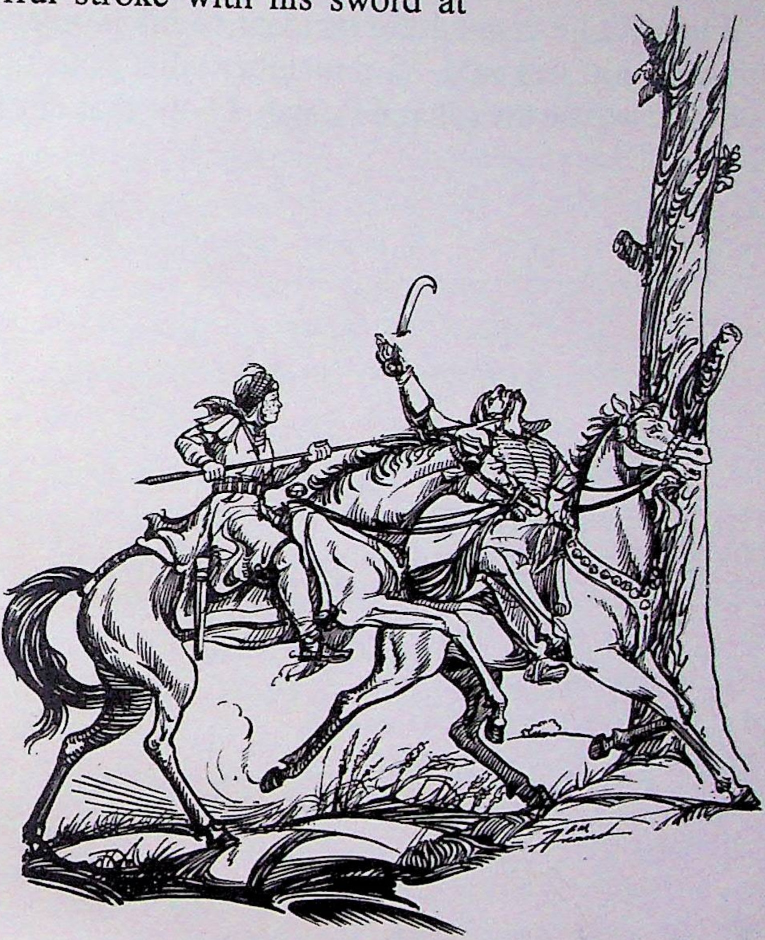
show my skill on the battlefield. I think I can kill as many of the enemy as each one of them did. May be that God will bless you, Sir, with long life so that you may get a chance of watching my exploits in the theatre of war." Amir Singh felt proud of his student and reported to Mahan Singh the boy's skill in warfare.

Proving his Mettle

The opportunity for Ranjit Singh to prove his strength and fearlessness came sooner than expected. Mahan Singh decided to teach a lesson to the ruler of Gujrat who had failed to pay him the agreed annual sum of money. Seeing the warlike preparations of the troops, Ranjit Singh said to his father, "I want to accompany you and try my luck on the battlefield." Mahan Singh was delighted with his son's offer and replied: "Well, it will be a great experience for you when you test your military knowledge on the battlefield. Select your horse and accompany me tomorrow."

So the next day, Ranjit Singh, then a lad of eleven, marched with the army to Gujrat. The enemy took refuge in Sodhran fort. Mahan Singh besieged the fort for many weeks. He got ill and was advised to return to his home for treatment. Before leaving, Mahan Singh appointed his son as the head of the army. Imagine Ranjit Singh as the leader of the troops at that tender age! After some days, Ranjit Singh defeated the enemy and captured a lot of stores and weapons which he sent to his ailing father. Mahan Singh felt proud of his son's victory, but expired before Ranjit Singh was able to return home.

The responsibility of looking after the territories of the Sukerchakia family fell on Ranjit Singh's young shoulders. He administered the affairs with the help of his mother. However, he spent a lot of time in hunting, riding and practising military strategy. One day while chasing a wild animal in the jungle, he got separated from his companions. At that time, he came across one of the enemies of his father who was called Hashmat Khan. Finding the boy alone, Hashmat Khan challenged Ranjit Singh and shouted; "I want to settle an old score with you." Ranjit Singh did not lose his nerve and boldly answered, "I am not scared of you, though I am alone and you are twice my age. Let us fight a duel." Hashmat Khan readily accepted the challenge, being confident of his victory. He aimed a powerful stroke with his sword at



Ranjit Singh. The latter quickly pushed the horse back, with the result that Hashmat's sword just touched his belt. In a flash, Ranjit Singh pierced Hashmat with his spear. As Hashmat tried to run, Ranjit cut of his head and rode triumphantly alone.

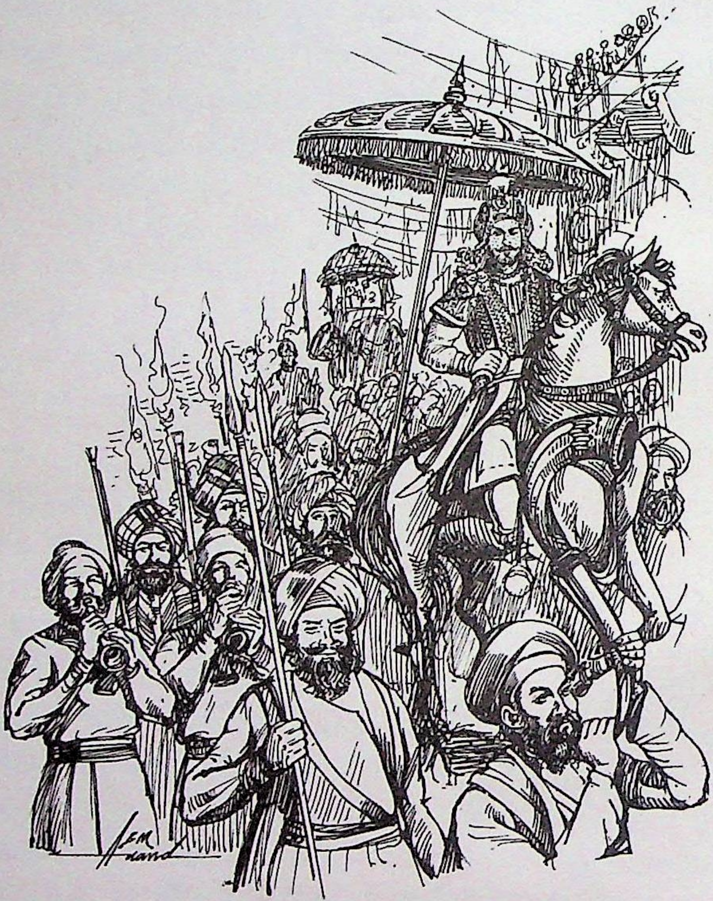
After a while, Ranjit Singh saw his companions at some distance and shouted to them. As they gathered, he showed them the glory trophy. They admired his daring and fearlessness. One of them remarked, "Sir, we believe this act of heroism is only a token and a promise of your achievements and victories in the years to come." When Ranjit related the incident to his mother she was overcome with joy and said, "I remember what your father had predicted. You will be the ruler of Punjab. I hope that day is not far off."

Ranjit Singh's Wedding

When Ranjit Singh became sixteen, his mother thought of solemnising his marriage. Mahan Singh had earlier fixed the engagement of Ranjit to an enemy's daughter as a means of peace and reconciliation. At the battle of Batala, Mahan Singh's enemy Gurbaksh Singh Kanihya was defeated and slain. His widow Sada Kaur came to the field of battle and declared, "Let the war between the Sikh chieftains cease. I will bring the two families together in bonds of amity and love by offering my daughter Mehtab Kaur to the son of Mahan Singh." Mahan Singh accpeted this matrimonial connection for Ranjit to ensure permanent peace between the two families.

Ranjit Singh's mother, Raj Kaur, called Sada Kaur and said to her, "Well, it is time that Ranjit be joined to your daughter in wedlock. Critical times are ahead and perhaps the wedding may further the interests of both the families." Sada Kaur replied, "Let us fix the date of marriage with Ranjit Singh as my son-in-law. I feel assured that the interests of my family—Kanihyas—will also advance." Invitations were issued to prominent Sikh leaders to attend the wedding at Batala. Preparations were made by Sada Kaur to receive the bride-groom and his guests. The city of Batala was illuminated with oil-lamps and decorated with buntings. A grand procession led by musicians passed through the streets till it reached the bride's house. A grand feast was laid out for the wedding party. Food was separately distributed to the poor and the disabled. The guests carried happy memories of Ranjit Singh's wedding.

Sada Kaur needed Ranjit Singh in her struggle for power. She asked for his help against the Ramgarhias which was gladly given. After some time Ranjit Singh went to Lahore as a guest of the



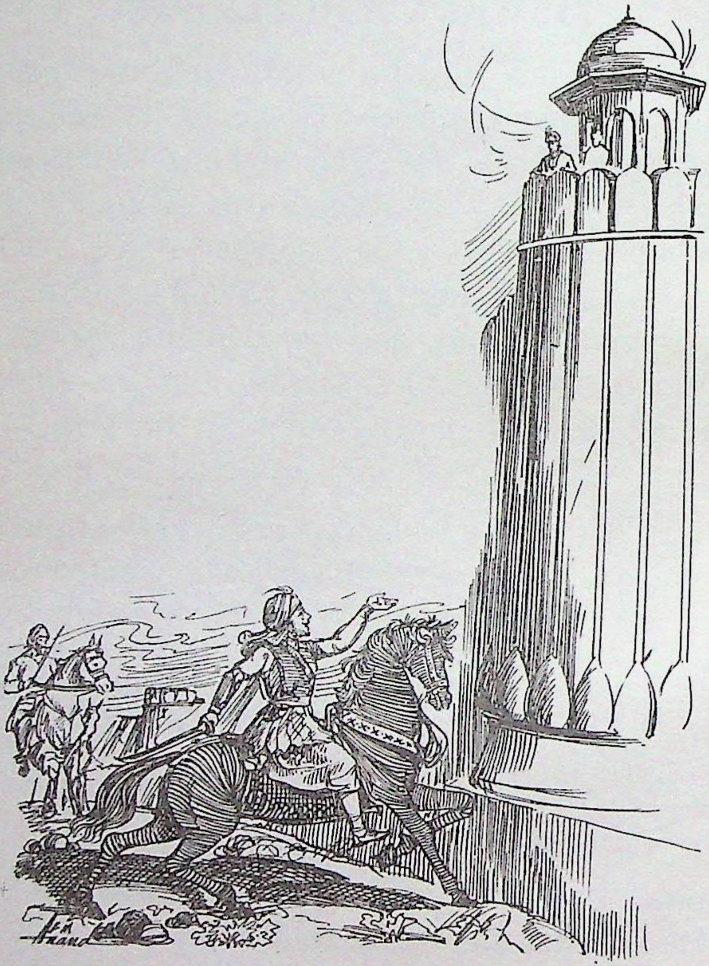
ruling Bhangi Sardars. He was much impressed by the wealth and grandeur of the city. He toyed with the ideas of capturing the city at the opportune moment. If he could win the city, he would be able to bring the Punjab under his banner.

Hawks versus Doves

Soon after his marriage, Ranjit Singh thought seriously of increasing his power and territory. However, he realised that there were great obstacles in his way. The Afghans were a serious threat to the Punjab. Moreover, the Punjab was disunited and its petty rulers were fighting among themselves. After a while, Shah Zaman, the Afghan adventurer took advantage of the in-fighting among the Punjab's chiefs and invaded the region. The Sikh community collectively called Sarbat Khalsa summoned an urgent meeting at Amritsar to consider the serious situation. Ranjit Singh was formally invited to attend the meeting.

The problem before the Sikhs was really grave-how to meet the Afghan challange. There were "doves" who wanted to avoid war, and "hawks" who wanted a fight to the finish. Sahib Singh Bhangi led the party of "doves." He declared: "We cannot face the Afghan in pitched battle; they have more men and superior weapons. We must therefore avoid an open confrontation and use guerilla tactics to harass the enemy whenever there is an opportunity." His friends supported this proposal.

On the other hand, Ranjit Singh represented the view of the "hawks". He felt that this was a golden opportunity to throw the Afghans out of the Punjab. He addressed the assembly as follows, "Let us follow the noble example set for us by Guru Gobind Singh. He, in his time, faced the Mughal army and defeated it many times. The Afghans are not as powerful as the Mughals. Let us face them boldly and in the open. We have faith in God and Guru and we will rather die bravely and with dignity than run away from danger. The Sikhs must fight a defensive war and God willing, we shall succeed." His eloquence and firmness won him great applause and so the die was cast. The Sikhs decided to fight against Shah Zaman and selected Ranjit Singh as the commander of the united Punjab army.



Ranjit Singh led his troops outside Amritsar to fight against the Afghans. Realising the strength and determination of Ranjit Singh's forces, the Afghans retreated to Lahore. Shah Zaman lost his courage when his bluff was called. He decided to leave for Kabul. However, he told his commanders and courtiers that his brother was plotting against him and so he must go back to Kabul to teach him a lesson. He left Lahore in charge of his commander-in-chief who had no alternative but to fight with the army of Ranjit Singh. The Afghans were demoralised by the absence of their ruler. Ranjit Singh defeated the Afghans near Lahore and won a great victory.

A Daring Challenge

Shah Zaman heard of the defeat of his army and rushed to the Punjab with a large contingent. The Sikh chiefs, as in the past, held a meeting at Amritsar to consider the action to be taken. After due deliberation, the assembly decided to fight under the leadership of Ranjit Singh. The Maharaja led the attack and pushed the Afghans back to Lahore. Soon thereafter, he took a few horsemen with himself and rode right up to the tower of Lahore fort. The Afghan court then in session broke up in panic. Ranjit Singh shouted to Shah Zaman from some distance and challenged him with the words, "O grandson of Abdali, come down and measure swords with the grandson of Charhat Singh." Shah Zaman had no guts to fight and kept quiet.

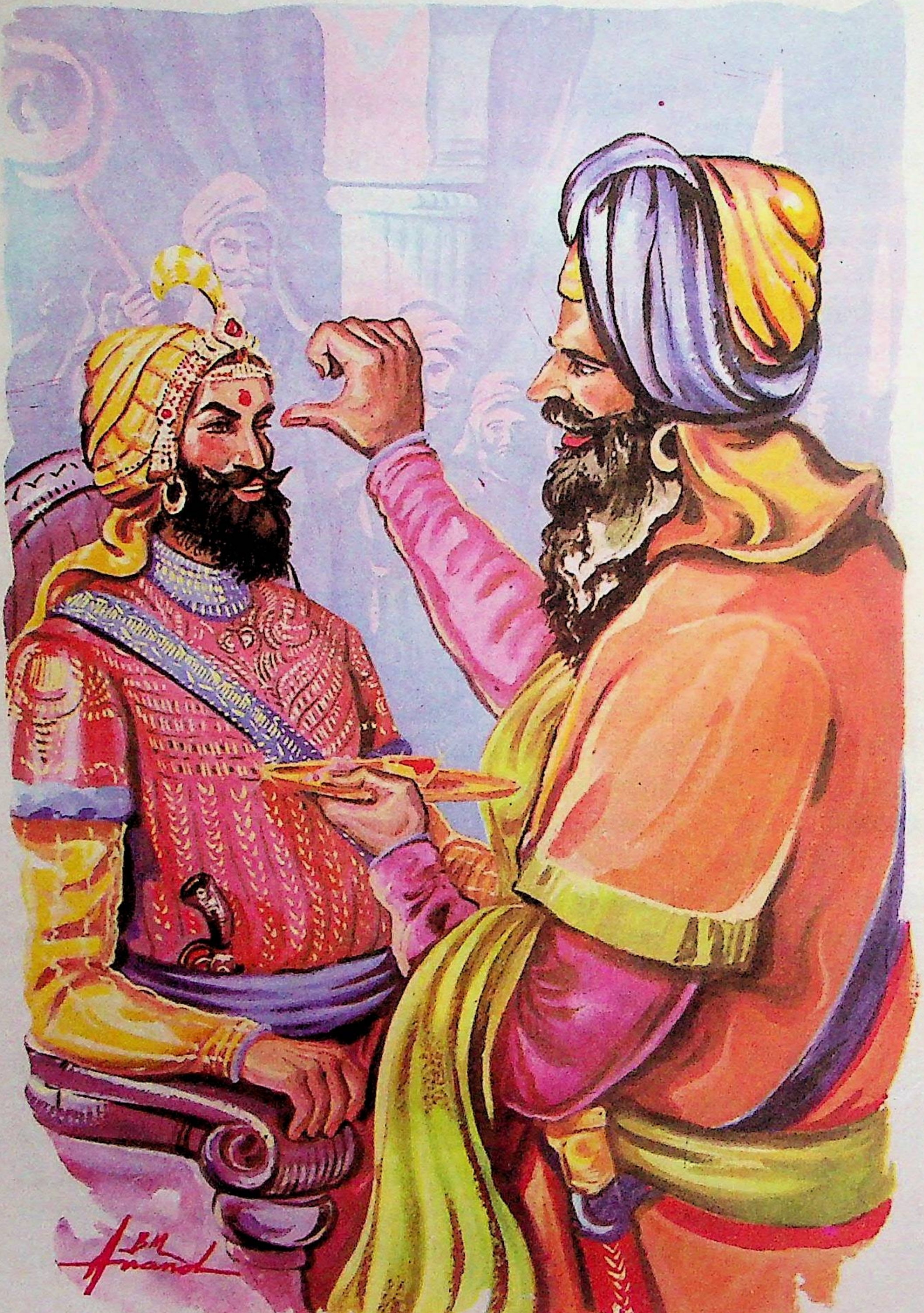
The Afghan ruler realised that he was no match for Ranjit Singh in battle and military strategy, and so he resorted to diplomacy and cunning. He sent his agents individually to Sikh leaders with promises of title, land and cash in order to cause disunity among their ranks. One of the veteran Sikh leaders Sahib Singh Bedi, got so fed up with the double dealing and hypocrisy of Shah Zaman that he declared openly on behalf of Sikh community as follows: ' "We accept no gifts or promises from foreign invaders. We shall not barter our freedom at any price. We shall settle this matter with our swords, under the command of Ranjit Singh." Shah Zaman knew that his tricks had failed. So in panic, he left Lahore. When he reached Kabul, he was deposed and blinded by his brother. With the danger from Afghanistan having ended, the road was now clear for Ranjit Singh to establish his rule over the other parts of the Punjab.

Coronation at Lahore

Ranjit Singh now set his eyes on Lahore. The local population was sick of the attacks and the depredations of foreign invaders and the misrule and corruption of the local chiefs. The leaders of different communities met secretly and decided to send an invitation to Ranjit Singh to capture the city. Ranjit Singh was overjoyed and said to Sada Kaur, "Lahore is the political capital of the Punjab, If I am lucky to capture it, I shall be able to control the trade routes and claim the loyalty and tribute of the rulers of the neighbouring regions. As the people of Lahore have invited me, I shall compensate them by giving them a strong and peaceful administration in due course."

Ranjit Singh prepared a comprehensive plan for the capture and occupation of Lahore. His future depended mainly on the result of this great adventure. He marched with his army to the south of Lahore city, while Sada Kaur blocked the eastern passage. The Bhangi rulers offered no resistance. The citizens welcomed Ranjit Singh with open arms as their liberator. He visited the different wards of the city, and assured the citizens of safety and good administration. As a token of his victory, Ranjit Singh formally occupied the Lahore fort. His soldiers fired their guns in the air, in his honour. He organised the management of the city with the help of local leaders.

In order to ensure unity among the Sikhs, Sahib Singh Bedi—the veteran leader—asked the dissidents to lay down their arms in front of him, which they did. Then he took up a sword and tied it round the waist of Ranjit Singh, declaring him to be the sole leader of the Sikh community. As a result, all the Sikh chiefs decided to confer the title of "Maharaja" on Ranjit Singh. The coronation ceremony was held in Lahore on Baisakhi day, 1801. Sahib Singh


B.M. Anand

Bedi put a saffron mark on the forehead of Ranjit Singh and declared him "Maharaja of the Punjab". The Maharaja then passed through the streets of Lahore, riding on a decorated elephant. Prayers were offered for his health and long life in Hindu temples, gurdwaras and mosques. In the evening the city was illuminated with lamps. The jubilation of the crowds was drowned by the bangs of crackers and fireworks.

Though Ranjit Singh had realised the dream of his life he did not feel proud or arrogant. He did not wear any badge of royalty to be a popular and benevolent monarch. He wanted to run the government for the benefit of the people, and with the cooperation of the representatives of all the communities.

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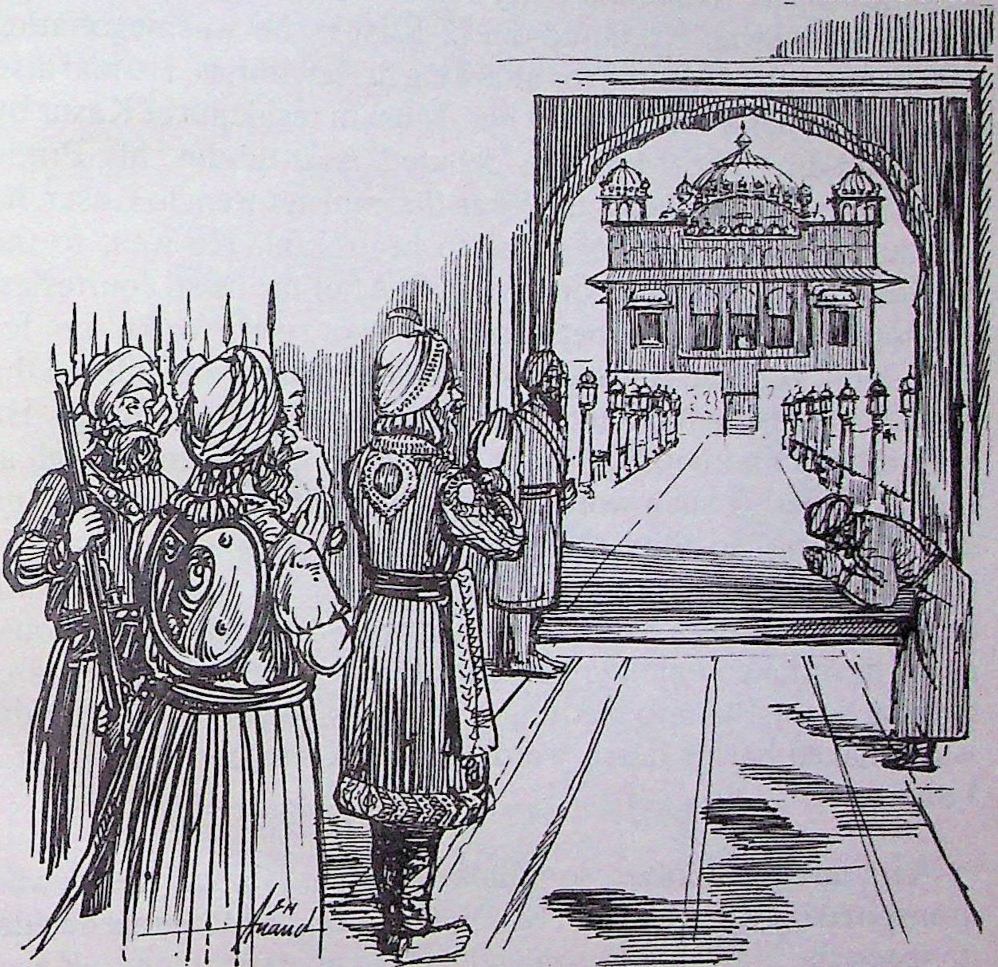
Victory at Amritsar

Maharaja Ranjit Singh now began to think of Amritsar. It was the religious and commercial capital of the Punjab. Moreover, for him it had a sentimental value as the holy city of Sikhs. If he could acquire Amritsar, he would be able to serve the communities and look after its places of worship and historical shrines. The condition of Amritsar was similar to that of Lahore. Its different parts were in the hands of petty chiefs known as Bhangi Sardars. The plight of the citizens was miserable, nay pathetic.

Fortunately, the citizens of Amritsar, taking a cue from the example of Lahore, extended an invitation to Ranjit Singh to take over the administration of the city and to expel the corrupt local chiefs. Responding to the popular demand, Ranjit Singh led his troops to the city of Amritsar and challenged the local leaders. The chiefs collected whatever troops were available. The citizens were afraid of getting crushed in between the two armies and declared, "Let no blood be shed in the holy city. We shall not allow Sikhs killing their own brothers. Let us avoid fighting and rally under one banner." These words turned the scales in favour of Ranjit Singh. The local chiefs surrendered and vowed loyalty to Ranjit Singh.

A little later, Gobindgarh fort also surrendered to Ranjit Singh. It contained an arsenal of weapons and cannons, including the famous *Zam-Zama*. Ranjit Singh appreciated the role played by Akali Phula Singh and offered him a position in his army. He brought with himself a large number of Nihang Sikhs who later proved very useful to the Maharaja against the Pathan soldiers. Even today, the Nihangs are renowned for their courage and fearlessness.

The capture of Amritsar was celebrated by taking out a victory procession. The Maharaja rode on a decorated elephant through the city-streets distributing charity to the poor. He paid a visit to the Golden Temple—the central shrine of the Sikhs—to offer his thanks to Guru Granth Sahib. He made offerings in cash and kind, ordered that the shrine be renovated with marble slabs and gold-plates. Subsequently, he held a military parade where he awarded medals and conferred titles on his courtiers and commanders.

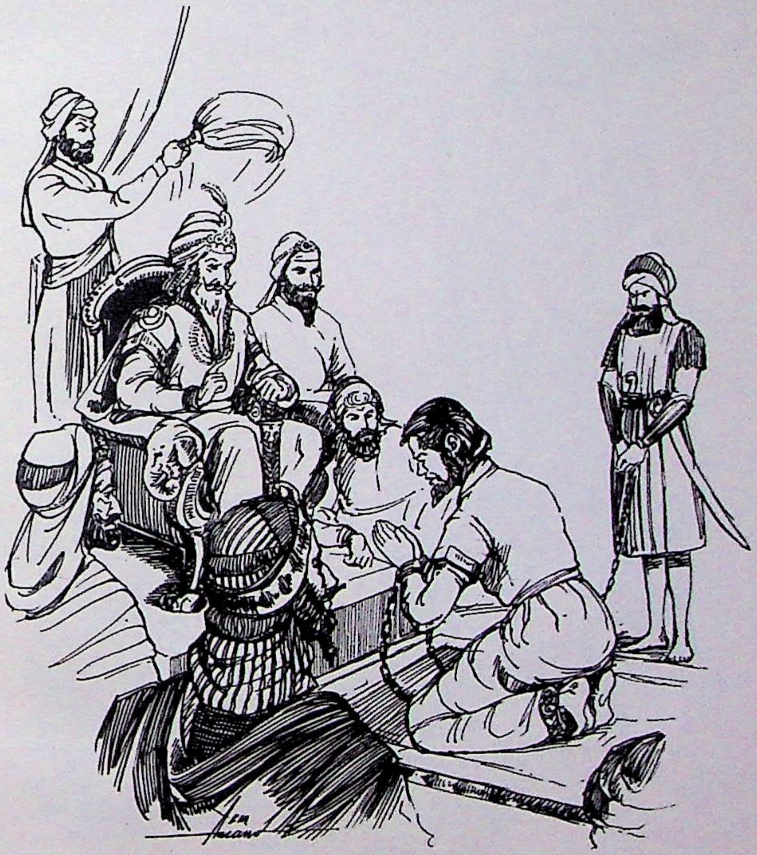


The bloodless occupation of the city added to the power and prestige of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It also boosted the morale of his troops. It appeared to his contemporaries that the Maharaja would make further additions to his territories and perhaps establish a full-fledged Punjab State in the near future.

Conquest of Kasur

Ranjit Singh kept his eyes and ears open and watched the activities of his rivals and petty rulers. He learnt of the hostile attitude of Nawab Kutub-ud-din of Kasur who was negotiating with the nawab of Multan for attacking his territories. He had also heard of the persecution of the non-Muslim residents of Kasur by Kutub-ud-din. The Maharaja deputed Aziz-ud-din, his Prime Minister to find out the facts. When the minister went to Kasur, he felt that his visit was not going to be fruitful. He went to the Nawab's residence for a courtesy-call. After the usual courtesies, the topic of relations between the two rulers came up for discussion. Aziz-ud-din was a seasoned diplomat and offered the hand of friendship to Kutub-ud-din on behalf of Ranjit Singh. He even offered an invitation to the Nawab to meet Ranjit Singh at Lahore. Hearing such words, the Nawab flared up. He could no more hide his hostility to Ranjit Singh and shouted, "I am an independent ruler. I do not want to be a slave like you. Are you not ashamed of serving a *Kafir*? A respectable Muslim like you should never have taken employment with Ranjit Singh. I would prefer fighting against him to licking his shoes as you do." Aziz-ud-din was amazed by his harsh words. He took his leave and left for Lahore.

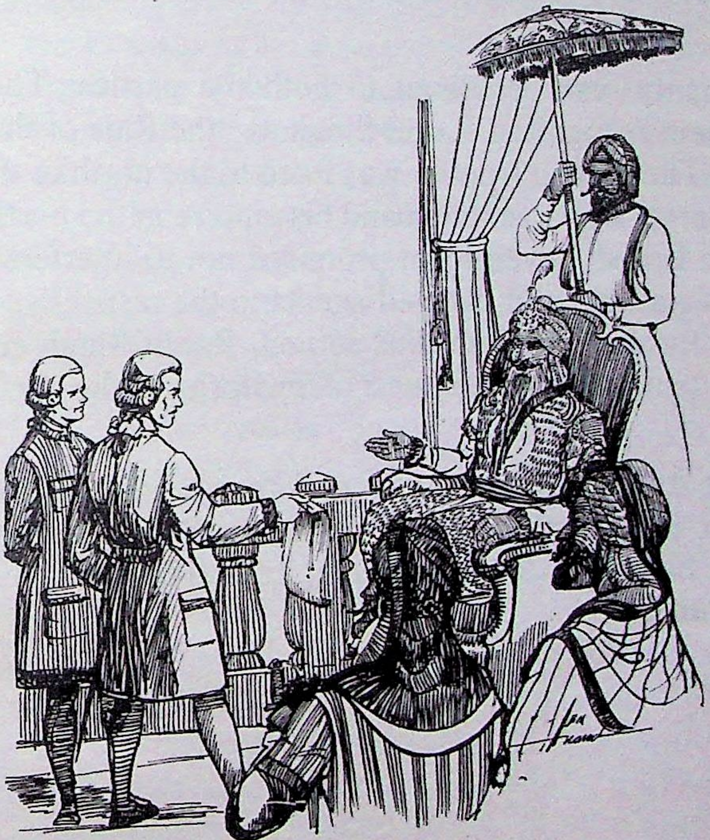
Aziz-ud-din reported to Maharaja Ranjit Singh about what transpired between him and Kutub-ud-din. The Maharaja decided to teach the Nawab a lesson and to lead an expedition to Kasur. The Nawab, in spite of his military preparations, could not face the forces of Ranjit Singh for long. He therefore took shelter in his fort. Ranjit Singh ordered the bombardment of the fort with cannons. The fort got breached and Kutub-ud-din tried to flee but was captured. The Maharaja asked Kutu-ud-din: "Why did you ill-treat my minister when he visited you? Secondly, why did you try to conspire with the Nawab of Multan to attack my territories. I have ample proof of your hostile activities." Kutub-ud-din had no other alternative but to admit his mistakes. He realised that he must surrender and seek the Maharaja's pardon. So with all the humility at his command, he knelt before Ranjit Singh and said, "I plead for your mercy and generosity. I have a family to support and would like to live in peace hereafter."



Maharaja Ranjit Singh was overcome by compassion at the sad plight of Kutub-ud-din. His heart melted at the entreaty of a fallen foe and he replied, "Well, now that you have surrendered and requested for leniency, I shall treat you with dignity and benevolence. I shall grant you an estate for life on the condition of your supplying 100 horsemen for service to me when required." Kutub-ud-din was delighted with the Maharaja's offer which had taken the sting out of his defeat. He thanked the Maharaja for the grant of an estate for life. Ranjit Singh placed the administration of Kasur under one of his senior officers and returned to Lahore.

Treaty of Friendship

Maharaja Ranjit Singh wanted to create a bigger and united Punjab. Some of the Sikh chieftains who were afraid of the growing might of Ranjit Singh approached the British Governor-General for help in opposing his territorial designs. Moreover, the



British rulers got apprehensive of Napoleon's designs in the East. It was feared that the French army would enter India from the north-west. The French had already some territory in the south of

India. The British rulers desired a friendly power in the Punjab to act as a buffer state. For these reasons, the British Governor-General sent Charles Metcalfe to Ranjit Singh for negotiating a treaty.

In the beginning, the Maharaja was suspicious of British intentions, because they had annexed a large portion of India. However, Ranjit Singh's courtiers advised caution to their ruler. They were against any unnecessary struggle with the British power. On receiving assurances of perpetual friendship from the British agent, the Maharaja agreed to sign the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809.

The Treaty was beneficial to both the parties. The British Government recognised Ranjit Singh as "the Raja of the state of Lahore". The British frontier was fixed to the north of the Sutlej. The Maharaja was free to expand his empire in the north and the west. The British government promised not to interfere with the Maharaja's affairs and pledged agents in the respective capitals. With the frontier problem thus settled, Ranjit Singh could now turn his attention to the conquest of territories in the north and the west.

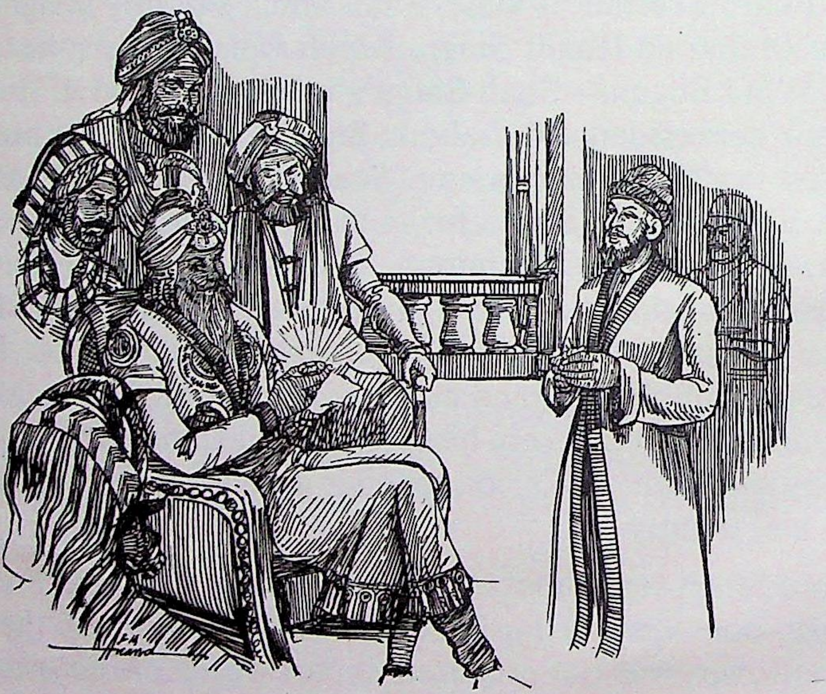
The treaty showed the political foresight and wisdom of the Maharaja. He secured the good-will of the British power and also got a free hand in extending his empire and thus establishing the greater Punjab.

Kohinoor Diamond

Ranjit Singh was extremely fond of jewellery. He had heard that the famous *Kohinoor* which means 'mountain of light' was in the possession of Shah Shuja, the ruler of Kabul. He desired to acquire it at any price. Fortunately, an event took place which provided him an opportunity to get this diamond. Shah Shuja was dethroned and expelled by his brother. He sought refuge in Kashmir, but as soon as he went there, he was imprisoned by its ruler. Fearing further trouble, Shah Shuja's family sought protection of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which was readily granted. As a result Wafa Begum—Shah Shuja's wife—travelled to the Punjab and took her residence in Lahore. She also wanted her husband to be freed from Kashmir prison. She therefore, invited Maharaja Ranjit Singh to her house for consultation. During the conversation, she said to the Maharaja, "Sir, if you attack Kashmir and liberate my husband and bring him safely to Lahore, I shall give you the *Kohinoor* diamond as compensation for the job. I want to be united with my husband as early as possible." The Maharaja accepted her offer and sent his troops to Kashmir. Shah Shuja was freed by the Maharaja's commander and brought to Lahore with pomp and dignity.

Ranjit Singh sent a message to Shah Shuja's wife to honour her promise, now that her husband had been united with the family. She, however, was not prepared to part with *Kohinoor* diamond. So she told the messenger, "I have pawned the diamond with a merchant in Kandhar and it is not with me." Ranjit Singh realised that the lady wanted to fool him. He therefore took a tough line of action. He placed Shuja's family under house arrest. Shah Shuja told his wife that the Maharaja meant business and succeeded in persuading her to honour her word. Consequently a message was sent to the Maharaja fixing the date and time for the delivery of the diamond at Shah Shuja's residence.

On the agreed day, Ranjit Singh with a few of his courtiers and officials went to Shah Shuja's house. After the usual greeting and welcome, there was a pin-drop silence. Then the Maharaja said to one of his courtiers, "I have come here for a special purpose and cannot afford to waste my time. If the object of my visit is not fulfilled, I shall take other steps." Shah Shuja understood the Maharaja's words and he ordered one of his servants to bring the diamond from his wife's cupboard. The servant brought a small bundle of cloth and handed it to the Maharaja. As soon as the Maharaja opened the bundle, the room appeared to be full of light. Even so, the Maharaja looked at the diamond and then told his minister Bhawani Das, "Will you examine this diamond? I believe you have seen *Kohinoor* before. If it is the real *Kohinoor*, I



shall take it." Bhawani Das examined the diamond carefully and replied, "Yes, your Highness, it is *Kohinoor*." The Maharaja wrapped it in the cloth and put it in his pockt. After bidding goodbye to Shah Shuja and the courtiers the Maharaja went to his palace.

Ranjit Singh was much pleased with the acquisition of *Kohinoor*. It had cost him a war with Kashmir. He was glad that his firmness had succeeded, because he could never have liked his being cheated out of a good bargain.

Conquest of Multan

Ranjit Singh now turned his eyes to the south of the Punjab. Multan was a commercial centre which attracted his attention. He thought it would bring him a lot of revenue and he would destroy the power of the Muslim governor who owed loyalty to the ruler of Afghanistan. Earlier he had sent two expeditions to Multan, but the Nawab had purchased his peace with promise of paying annual tribute. This was just a device to gain more time for mustering strength and seeking reinforcements. The Nawab once again failed to pay his annual dues.

Ranjit Singh got fed up with the Nawab's dialatory tactics and decided to teach him a lesson once for all. Both parties made great preparations for war. The Nawab strengthened the fort of Multan and its defences. In 1818, Ranjit Singh sent a force of 20,000 soldiers with machine-guns to reduce the fort of Multan. Prince Kharag Singh inspected the fort and decided to concentrate his attack on one side. The volleys fired by the famous *Zam-Zama* cannon ultimately breached the fort-wall. The Maharaja's troops now faced the Nawab's soldiers. For the Nawab it was a desperate fight. He shouted to his soldiers. "This is a war for the defence of *Islam-a-Jehad.* My brave soldiers will die fighting till the last man for the glory of their faith. We shall not surrender, come what may." He came to the fore-front along with his two sons to lead his soldiers. The fighting was fierce. The Nawab and his sons fought bravely till they fell dead. As soon as the soldiers lost their leaders, they surrendered to the Maharaja's army.

Prince Kharag Singh annexed Multan region and led a victory-procession through the streets of the city. The two surviving sons of the Nawab were brought to Lahore and Ranjit Singh treated them with dignity and generosity. Each was given a suitable pension for life. With the fall of Multan, the Afghan menace in this region came to an end. Multan provided considerable revenue to the Maharaja's treasury and opened the gate-way for trade with Sind.

Welcome at Srinagar

One day as Maharaja Ranjit Singh was holding his court in Lahore fort, a Brahmin along with a few of his friends rushed in. He had come post-haste from Kashmir. His name was Birbal Dhar and he had held the post of Revenue Minister with the Muslim ruler of Kashmir. Dhar told his story of woe to the Maharaja, drawing his attention to the miserable plight of the Hindus of Kashmir. At the end, he said, "Sir, this is an opportune moment for you to attack Kashmir. You can rely on the support of both Hindu and Muslim inhabitants because they are fed up with the injustice and curelty of their ruler. The Maharaja told him to be calm and patient, because it would take him some time to make a decision.

Ranjit Singh held consultations with the commanders of his army. After a while, the Maharaja held a meeting to chalk out a plan of a two-pronged attack on the Kashmir valley. One column of troops was led by Prince Kharag Singh and the other by Diwan Chand. The Maharaja's artillery opened batteries on the Kashmiri soldiers, while Akali Phula Singh's Nihang Sikhs engaged the Afghan horsemen. The Nawab found it difficult to face the attack from two sides. He fought for a while but finding no chance of success, he fled away from the battlefield. His troops, finding their Nawab absent surrendered to the Maharaja's army.

Prince Kharag Singh announced the annexation of Kashmir to the state of Punjab. The residents of Srinagar gave a rousing reception to the prince as he entered the city in triumph. He ordered his officers as follows: "Do not molest any man, woman or child. Let normal life and business continue in the city as before." The citizens were much pleased with the courtesy and consideration of the officers placed in charge of the administration.

Prince Kharag Singh spent the better part of summer in the cool and healthy climate of the valley of Kashmir. While returning to Lahore, he spent a day in Amritsar to offer thanksgiving at the Golden Temple.

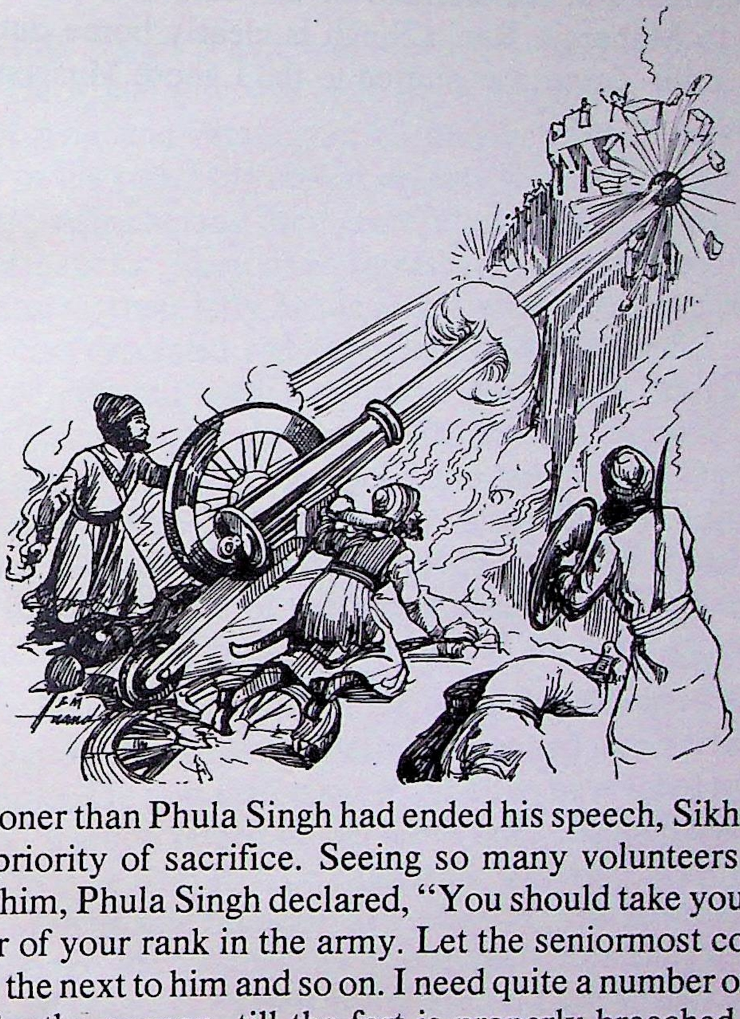
Kashmir proved to be a source of great revenue of the treasury of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Moreover, its annexation extended the Maharaja's dominions right up to the high peaks of the Himalyan mountains.

The Story of Human Wheels

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was very proud of the possession of the historical cannon called *Zam-Zama,* which he had acquired during the capture of Amritsar. It was known to be the biggest and the most powerful cannon in the Punjab. Originally it was cast in Lahore out of a mixtue of brass and copper for Ahmed Shah Abdali, who left it when he returned to Kabul. It was subsequently acquired by the Bhangi Sardars and it was therefore called *Bhangian-ki-Tope.*

The Maharaja realised the potentialities of this cannon. He wanted to make it mobile so that it could be carried anywhere. One day he said to Phula Singh, "I want to get a platform made for this cannon so that it can be moved to any part of the battle-field in case of need." Accordingly Phula Singh got a suitable platform fitted with wheels made for the cannon and it became quite mobile.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh used *Zam-Zama* in his attacks on many cities and forts. It proved extremely useful during the attack on Multan fort. *Zam-Zama* discharged a ball of eighty pounds of solid metal each time into the walls of the fort, but the holes made were quickly filled up with sand bags by the Nawab's troops. The Sikh gunners discharged shots with great accuracy and quickness. Suddenly one of the rear wheels of the platform broke and the cannon could not be fired, unless it was given proper support. Realising the gravity of the situation, Akali Phula Singh shouted to his Sikh soldiers, "Recall the incident which occurred at the court of Guru Gobind Singh. When a sikh brought a new musket to the Guru, the latter wanted to test its firing range. So he called for a Sikh volunteer as a human target. No sooner the call was made, a number of Sikhs came running to offer themselves as human targets for the testing of the musket. This is a similar situation. I want a Sikh soldier each time to serve as a human wheel to support the *Zam-Zama* cannon. Let me see how many offer themselves as volunteers for this purpose." This incident is based on the testimony of a Muslim historian, masquerading as a soldier, who happened to witness it.



No sooner than Phula Singh had ended his speech, Sikh soldiers ran for priority of sacrifice. Seeing so many volunteers rushing towards him, Phula Singh declared, "You should take your turn in the order of your rank in the army. Let the seniormost come first and then the next to him and so on. I need quite a number of human wheels for the cannon, till the fort is properly breached."

Accordingly the soldiers stood in line according to their ranks in the army. The seniormost soldiers came out first to support the axle of the carriage platform on his shoulders. As *Zam-Zama* was fired, he fell dead under the pressure and the recoil thereof. The volunteers took their turn facing sure death. With the eleventh shot, a big breach was made in the fort wall and as such eleven Sikhs lost their lives. Phula Singh and his Nihang soldiers rushed to charge the enemy inside the fort.

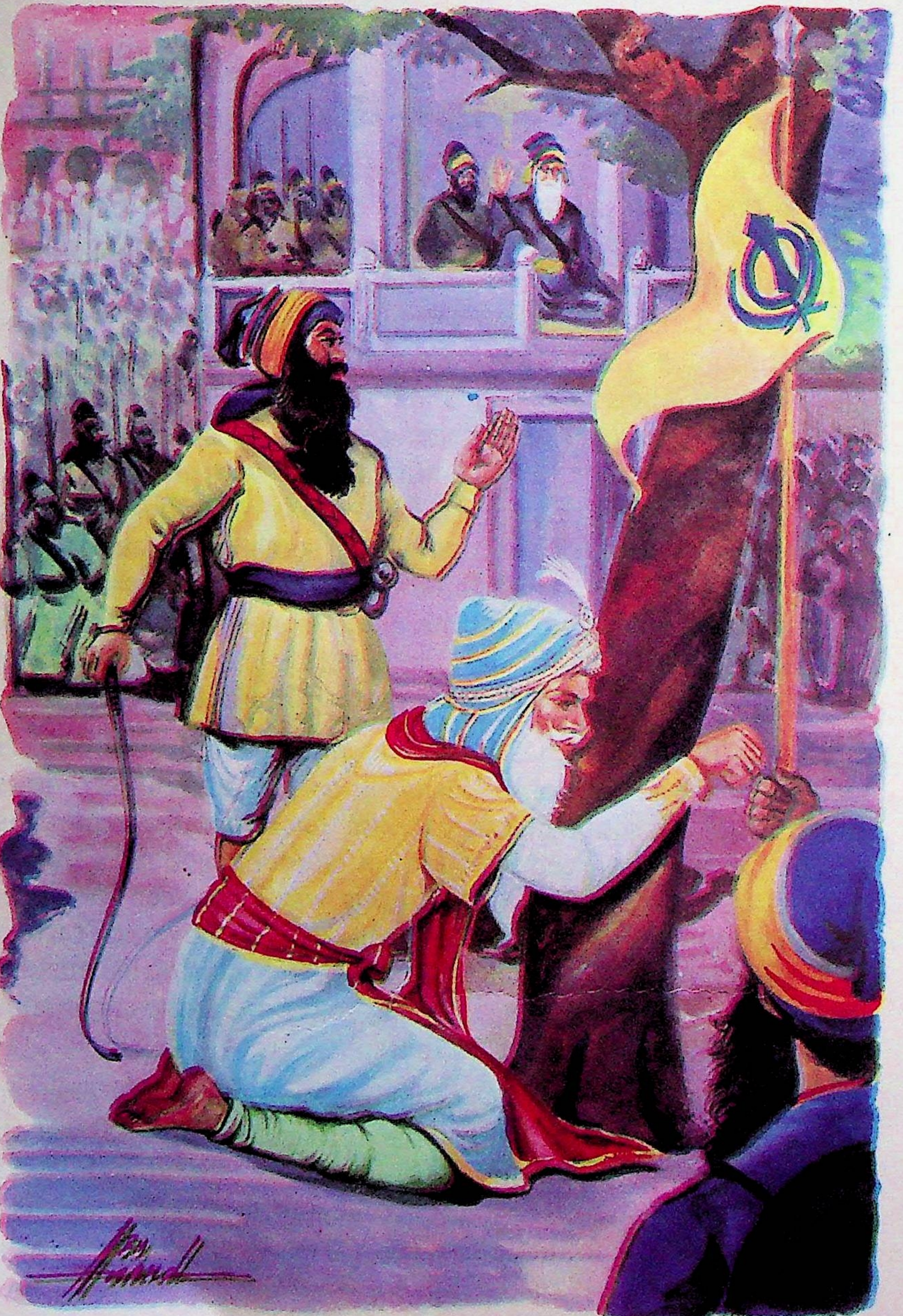
The heroism and fearlessness of the Sikh soldiers and their devotion to Maharaja Ranjit Singh is clearly borne out by this incident. *Zam-Zama* was shifted to the Lahore Museum by the British rulers in 1860.

The Best Horse

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was extremely fond of good pedigree horses. He would pay any price for a fine mare. He had a great liking for Arab and Persian horses, and there were quite a number of them in his stables. Foreign visitors were much impressed by the quality of his horses, their graceful movements and proficiency in performances. They have furnished accurate descriptions of their features, their lofty heads and fleet actions. The bridles and saddles were decorated with precious stones. On special occassions, they were covered with Kashmiri shawls with borders of gold laces. It is said that there were 1300 kinds of bridles, massively ornamented with silver and gold and some were studded with jewels and emeralds. The Maharaja inspected the horses almost daily and adorned them with precious stones of his treasury for special displays. Two of the fine horses were kept saddled and ready for mounting in the lower part of the royal palace.

Ranjit Singh had a passion for acquiring the best horses. He learnt that the Governor of Peshawar owned a remarkable horse called *Laili.* He sent a message to him that he wanted to purchase it. The Governor agreed to sell it but later changed his mind and refused to part with it. The Maharaja was very keen to get this horse and so he sent his army to Peshawar. The governor's troops were defeated and Peshawar was occupied. Realising his mistake, the Governor sought pardon and delivered *Laili* to the commander of the troops, as gift to the Maharaja.

Some people say that the Maharaja paid too high a price for acquiring *Laili*. When one of the foreign travellers asked the Maharaja, "How much had *Laili* cost you?" he replied frankly "Well my hobby—horse—has cost me a fortune— sixty lakhs of rupees and 12000 soldiers. But *Laili's* worth it." This was what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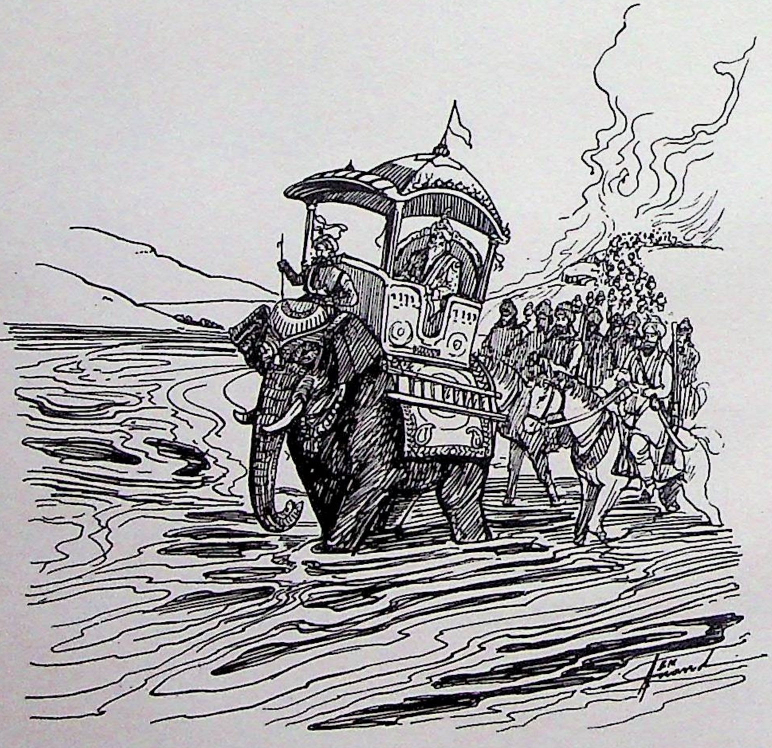
the Peshawar expedition had cost the Maharaja. *Laili* was dark grey in colour, with black eyes, thirteen years old and about eight feet in height. Undoubtedly, she was the best horse in the northern India and the finest in the royal stables.

A Royal Pardon

Ranjit Singh was much annoyed with the Afghans and the frontier tribes which created trouble and revolt on his northern border, from time to time. Off and on, they attacked the citizens, looted their properties and captured them and sold them as slaves. The Maharaja decided to punish the tribes and to put a stop to their criminal activities and atrocities, ones for all. So he called Akali Phula Singh and said to him, "Well, I would like to subjugate them and restore peace on our borders." Phula Singh replied, "Yes, Sir, it is time that the tribes be punished for their heinous crimes



against our subjects. However, it is very difficult to govern these wild people. They are trigger-happy and do not understand the norms of civilised behaviour and peaceful life. Let us try our best to discipline and reform them."

The Maharaja led the troops to the north. He crossed the Attock river, riding an elephant. His soldiers followed, though some of them and lots of baggage were swept away by the stream. When the troops reached Peshawar, they attacked the Nawab's forces and defeated them. The Maharaja ordered that the citizens of Peshawar should not be disturbed or molested. He rode triumphantly through the streets. The defeated Nawab agreed to pay an annual tribute and was appointed as Governor of Peshawar.

The Governor was attacked by Azim Khan and he ran away in panic. The Maharaja sent Phula Singh and his contingent to reclaim Peshawar from Azim Khan. The Maharaja's troops defeated him. The former Governor sought pardon once again for Ranjit Singh for having run away during Azim Khan's attack. The Maharaja was magnanimous to pardon him again and reappointed him as Governor of Peshawar.

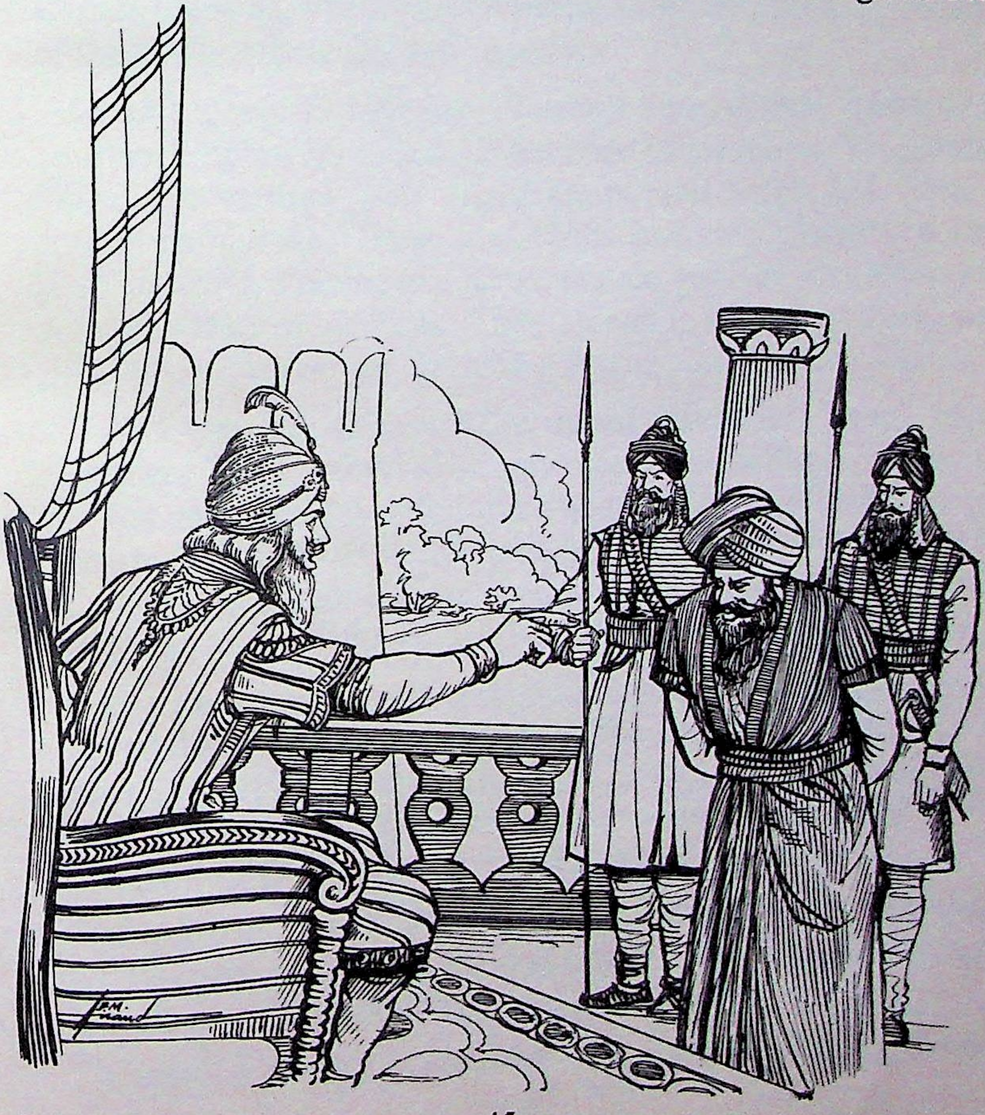
A Ruler's Grief

Ranjit Singh was annoyed with the reports of frequent disturbances in the Peshawar region. So he removed the Muslim Governor and appointed his ablest officer, General Hari Singh Nalwa as the Governor of Peshawar. The first thing that Nalwa did was to abolish the *Jazia* tax on the non-Muslims. He also wanted to teach a lesson to the unruly tribes and so he carried fire and sword into their homes, with the result that his name struck terror in the hearts of the inhabitants. He organised the defences of several towns and built a number of forts in the region.

Dost Muhammed, the ruler of Afghanistan, did not like the fortifications erected by Nalwa and sent a nasty letter to the Maharaja challenging him to face the Afghan sword. Ranjit Singh accepted the challenge and desired to solve this problem at an early date. He asked General Nalwa to keep the forces ready for the threat from Afghanistan.

In 1837, Maharaja Ranjit Singh got busy with the preparations of the marriage of his grandson, Nau Nihal Singh. Taking advantage of the Maharaja's preoccupation, Dost Muhammed attacked the Maharaja's army located in the frontier, but he was defeated. His forces again reassembled near the Khyber Pass. Nalwa sensed the gravity of the situation and sent an urgent communication to the Maharaja at Lahore for reinforcements. Unfortunately that letter was not delivered to the Maharaja at Lahore by Dhian Singh, because he was busy in the marriage fesitivities. Nalwa wanted his soldiers who had gone to attend the Prince's marriage at Lahore. However, with whatever troops he had, he faced the Afghan troops. He chased them and after a while got separated from his army. Finding him alone, some Afghan soldiers suddenly attacked him. He received a number of wounds in a desparate and unequal fight. As he was bleeding, his soldiers joined him and took him to Jamrud Fort for medical treatment. His condition got worse and he died, but his death was kept a secret till the arrival of reinforcements. When the troops arrived, they drove the Afghans beyond the border.

The Maharaja rode post-haste to Jamrud, but on the way he came to know of Nalwa's death. He felt choked with grief. He



called Dhian Singh, his minister, and rebuked him for not giving him the letter of Nalwa in time. He felt that he was partly responsible for the death of Nalwa. If he had got the message in time, he would have sent the reinforcements immediately and thus possibly saved the life of the great warrior. In Hari Singh Nalwa, the Maharaja had lost a great friend and a military genius.

Colourful Foreigners

Maharaja Ranjit Singh had a searching eye for talent and he picked up any one who could be useful to him. He was a liberal ruler and did not bother about the colour, creed, caste or nationality of his employees. He engaged a number of English, Italian, German, French and American officers. What he required of them was efficiency and loyalty.

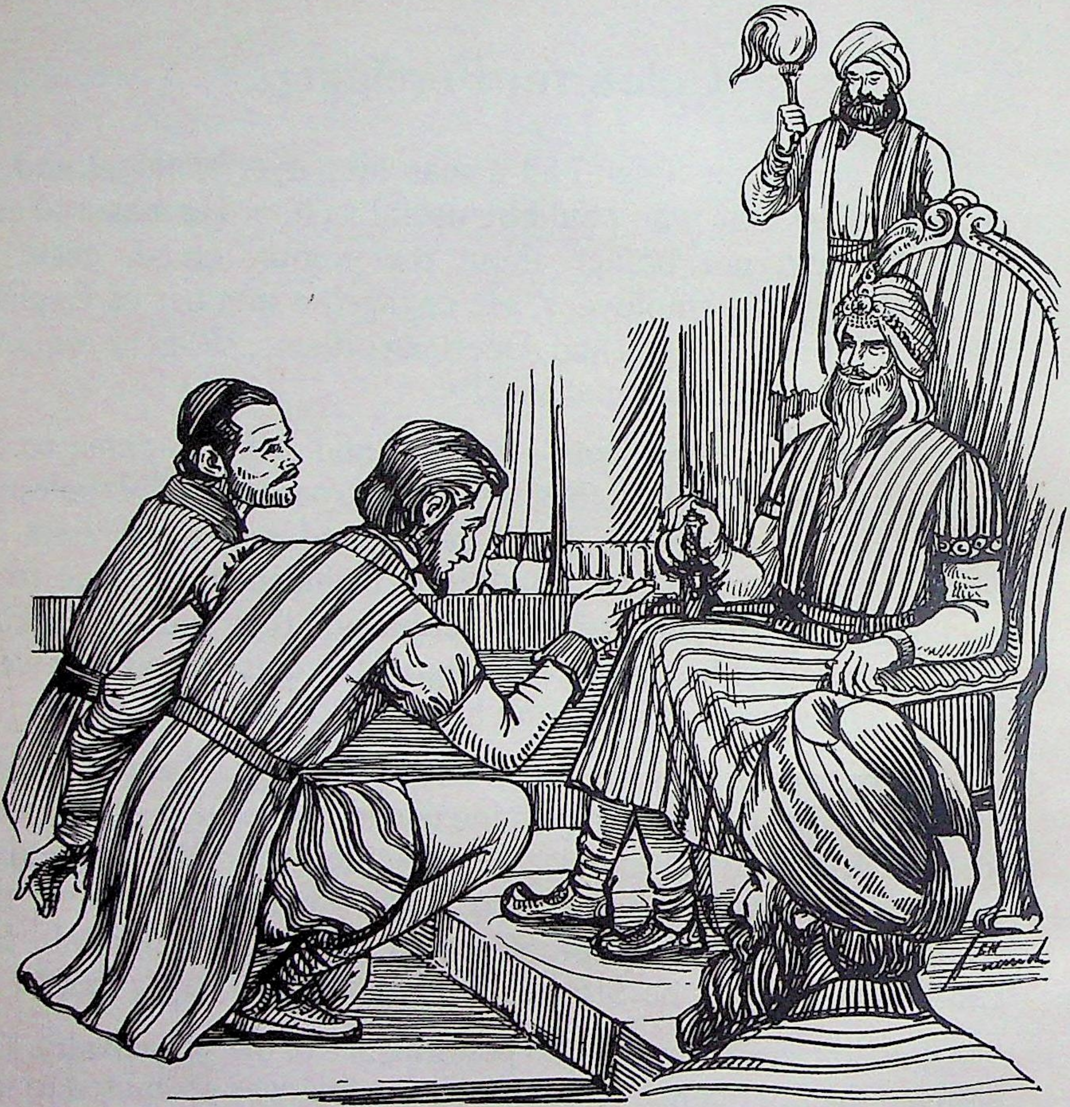
In 1822, two Europeans—Ventura and Allard—came to his court for employment. Both of them had experience of Napoleonic Wars. He verified their qualifcations and employed them on certain conditions. These conditions included abstinence from beef, smoking, shaving and an assurance on their part of working in the interests of his State. They agreed to these terms and were given high salaries, for training his army on Western lines.

The European officers were called *Firangees* which meant foreigners. They proved to be quite useful and reliable employees. Ventura improved the organisation and efficiency of the Maharaja's infantry. He took an active part in the expeditions against the Frontier tribes and was promoted to the rank of General. He continued to serve the State even after Ranjit Singh's death.

Allard improved the skill and performance of the sikh cavalry. He enjoyed the confidence of the Maharaja and was promoted to the rank of General. He went on leave to France and brought a pair of pistols for which the Maharaja suitably compensated him. On his death he was given a State funeral by the Maharaja.

Henry Court improved the Maharaja's artillery. He established arsenals on modern lines. He was also a man of literary taste and wrote Persian inscriptions for the guns cast by him.

Though the foreigners lent colour and grandeur to the Lahore



Court, it would be incorrect to say that the Maharaja's victories or annexations were due to them. Most of the territories were acquired by Ranjit Singh before 1822, when he appointed foreign officers for the first time. Europeans trained the army no doubt, but the conquests were largely due to the military genius of the Maharaja and the bravery and fearlessness of his soldiers, who were ready to sacrifice themselves for his sake. However, the

Maharaja used foreign officers for difficult and unpopular tasks, where local officers could not be effective. On special occasions and festivals, the Maharaja rewarded the officers and shared his fun and frivolity with them.

A Military Genius

The Maharaja's victories over his enemies were not due to good luck or chance but to thorough preparations and military strategy. He went into minor details whenever he undertook an important expedition. His efforts towards the reorganisation and modernisation of his army not only increased its efficiency and striking muscle but also improved its morale. Of course the cavalry soldiers with their flashing swords, bright spears and mighty shields had their own part to play in different battles. The Maharaja also improved the performance of the cavalry. Some of the big landlords who were under an obligation of maintaining a certain number of horsemen, but failed to do so, were duly penalised. The military code was followed in case of offences, but strangely enough there was no death penalty under it. The Maharaja explained this point thus: "We punish no doubt, but we do not take life."

On the other hand, the Maharaja was liberal in giving awards and promotions to soldiers for acts of valour and outstanding performance. He inspected the troops regularly and granted prizes to smart soldiers. His horsemen were really picturesque and colourful. The *Nihangs* with their drawn swords in hand, rifles on their back and two or three quoits—steel rings—round their turban and dressed in blue looked very smart and attractive.

The Maharaja combined the traditional art of warfare with the latest technology. He devoted his time and energy to the improvement of the ordinance department called *Tope Khana*. Heavy guns were cast in a foundry established by him at Lahore. These guns were heavy and were drawn by horses or bullocks, and proved to be very useful in shelling forts and other defence systems.

The Maharaja's army though full of men of different faiths and nationalities was free from jealousy or bickering. The Maharaja had a word of encouragement both for the General and the fresh recruit. He praised acts of valour and fearlessness of individual soldiers in open court. He loved the common *jawan* (sepoy) and looked after his interests. The Maharaja not only increased the number and efficiency of his army, but also made it one of the best in India. But for his military genius, he would not have been able to rule the greater Punjab and extend its boundaries so much further.

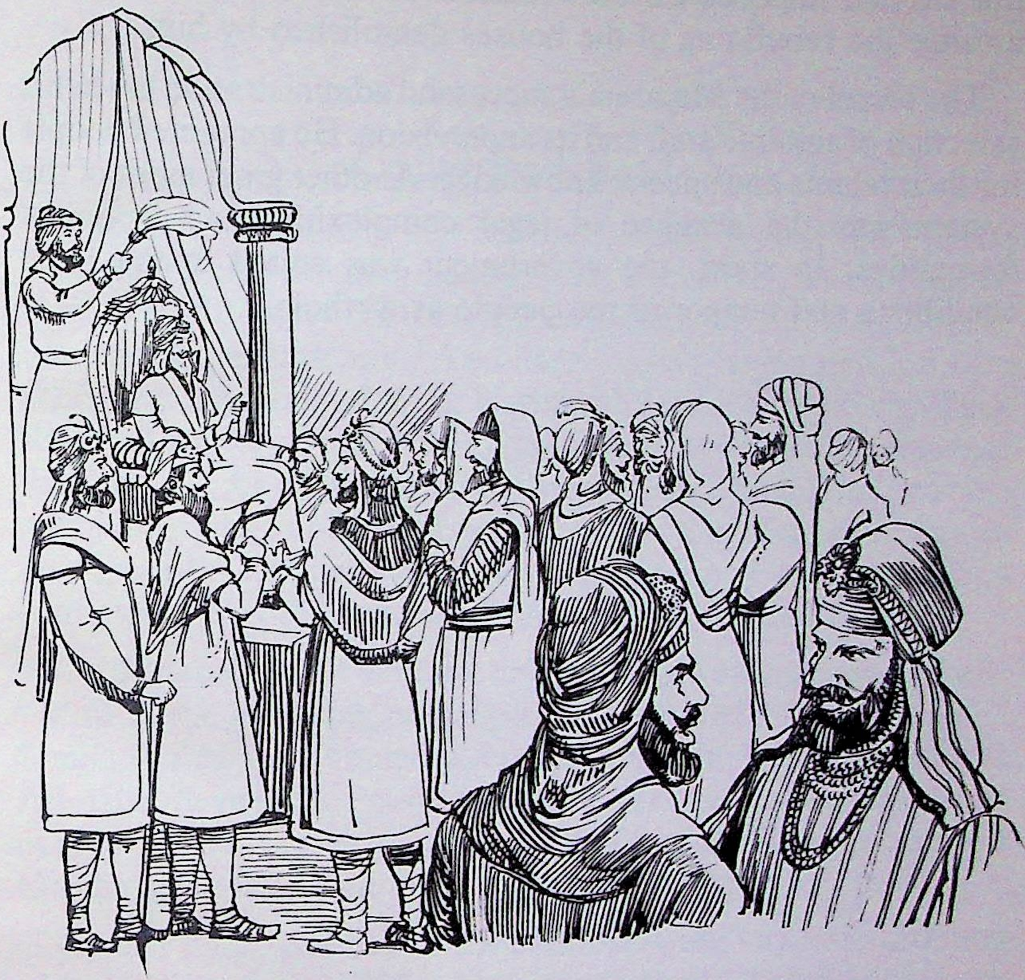
An Ideal Administrator

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was not only a great conqueror but also a capable administrator. Whenever he annexed a region or province, he organised its civil government on sound lines. As soon as he captured Lahore, he arranged for the administration of the city. He put the police department under the charge of Imam Baksh. The judicial department was reorganised and the officers were asked to deal with cases according to the customary law.

As the Maharaja's empire got extended with the acquisition of new territories, he organised the central government. The greater Punjab was divided into four provinces—Lahore, Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar. Each province was managed by a Governor called *Nazim*. He was assisted by the District Officers called *Kardars*. Under them were several subordinate officers, one in charge of a group of villages known as *Tehsildar.* Sawan Mal proved to be a very efficient Governor of Multan.

A Central Secretariat was set up at Lahore which had more than ten departments. The Maharaja appointed Fakir Aziz-ud-din as his Prime Minister, and Raja Dina Nath as his Finance Minister. The Maharaja held the court where every citizen could approach him with any complaint or grievance. He was accessible to one and all. He often granted reduction of taxes or total remission of dues, in case of famine or natural disaster.

The judicial system devised by Ranjit Singh worked quite satisfactorily. In the villages, the *Panchayat* decided the petty cases and disputes. Above it, was the court of the *Kardar* and then over it, the court of *Nazim*. Final appeals in civil and criminal cases were heard by the Maharaja. Crimes were generally punished with fine and imprisonment. There was no capital punishment even for serious crimes. On the whole, the judicial



system proved to be equitable and inexpensive and suited to the need of the people.

The Maharaja's tours and incognito visits to different places and at different times were helpful in preventing oppression and corruption. As the humblest citizen could approach the ruler direct, the officers generally behaved courteously and kept themselves on their toes. The Maharaja had placed a complaint box outside the palace where petitions could be lodged. The Maharaja took action against officers if justice demanded it. On one occasion, he compelled General Avitabile to remit the unjust fine he had imposed on the residents of Peshawar and also to arrange the rebuilding of the houses demolished by him.

The secret of the Majaraja's successful administration lay in his selection of suitable staff and its supervision. He appointed people for their talents and special knowledge. Another great merit of the system was the absence of legal complexities and technical formalities. In short, the government was suited to the local conditions and temper of the people as a whole.

Coins and Seals

Soon after assuming control over some parts of the Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh decided to issue coins. His coins, however, were to be different from the traditional ones. He called his finance minister and said to him: "You have to issue new coins, but they shall bear the name of Guru Nanak who is the True King. They shall be known as *Nanak-Shahi* coins and shall carry the names of the Gurus." As such, the first silver rupee coin did not bear the name or emblem of the Maharaja. On the front of the coin was an inscription in Persian which meant as under: 'Food, power and instant aid are obtained from Nanak-Guru Gobind Singh.'

On the other side of the coin, the following words were inscribed : "Mint of the Kingdom of Lahore, Sambat 1858 (1801 A.D.)." Similar coins were issued almost every year from Lahore and Amritsar. Some rupee coins had emblems of an anchor and a leaf next to the year of issue. *Nanak-Shahi* coins were also cast at Multan after 1818 and in Kashmir after 1828.

Copper coins of small denominations were struck in different mints and continued till the Maharaja's death. These coins were remarkable for their bold execution and an unusual weight. Gold coins called *Muhurs* were also issued from time to time. Some of them are displayed in the British Museum, London. They bear the usual inscription in Gurmukhi script and on the reverse is *Wahguruji*—the Holy Word of the Sikhs.

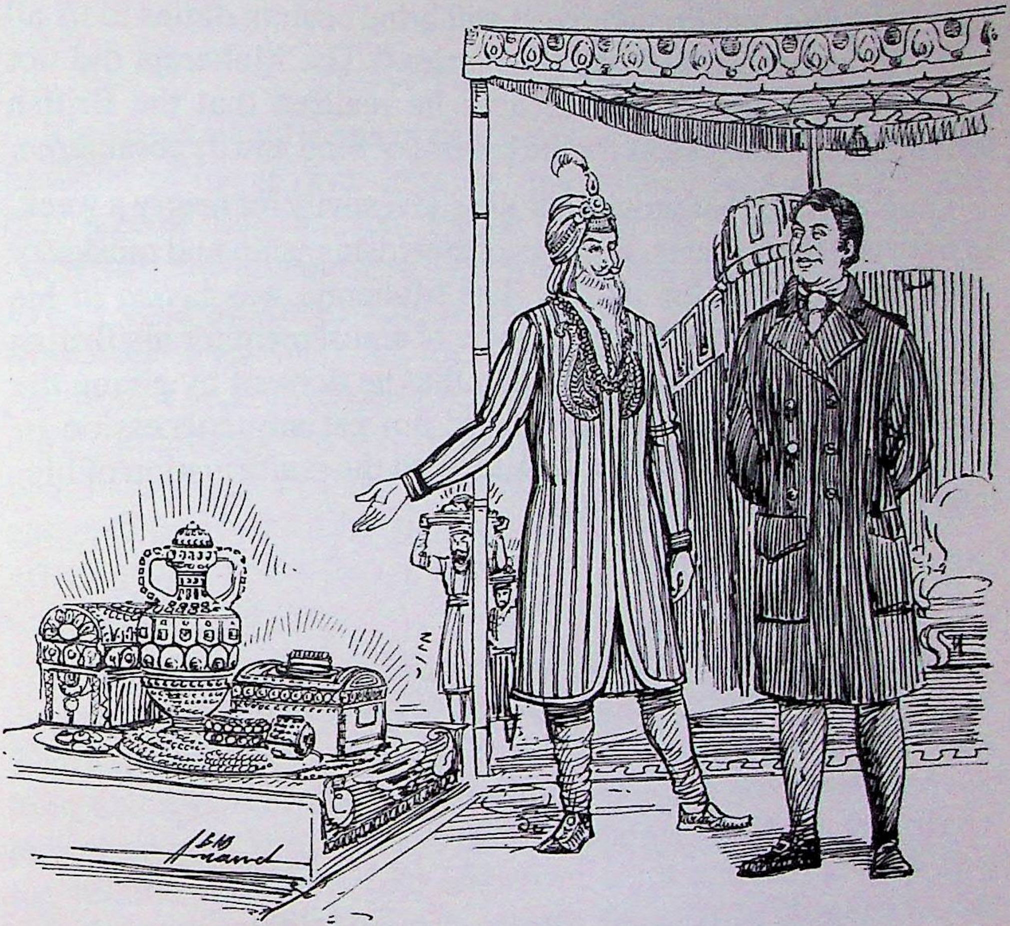
Maharaja Ranjit Singh's coins confirm his belief that the Gurus were the real Kings and he was only their agent for serving the people. His royal seals also did not bear his name or effigy. They were circular in shape and contained a verse in Gurmukhi script.

Rupar Darbar

Though the British power had made a treaty with Maharaja Ranjit Singh, it made secret arrangements with the rulers of Sind. The Maharaja became suspicious of the activities of the British in the province of Sind which was situated to the south of Multan. He, therefore, invited Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, to discuss matters of mutual interest at a meeting at Rupar in 1831.

This meeting though fixed for a political discussion out to be a splendid and gorgeous Field of Cloth of Gold which provided pageantry and entertainment on a lavish scale. The Maharaja rode on an elephant on the bank of the Satluj river and approached the British camp. He was received by the Governor-General and his party with the usual courtesy and greeting. Two hundred trays full of gifts, a few horses and two elephants were presented by Lord Bentinck to the Maharaja. The conversation was carried on with the help of interpreters. Thereafter, the English ladies performed a folk dance which provided amusement to the Maharaja and his courtiers.

The next day, Lord Bentinck made a courtesy call at the Maharaja's camp. As soon as he approached, a gun salute was fired in his honour. The Maharaja's pavilion was decorated with velvet coverings embroidered with gold thread. After the formal introduction of his courtiers, the Maharaja signalled for entertainment. A troop of Kashmiri dancing girls with yellow turbans appeared on the stage and performed a dance-item. The Maharaja then presented a hundred trays of the best products of the Punjab, two fine horses and an elephant and offered a string of pearls to the chief guest. The latter held a formal inspection of the Guard of Honour and this was followed by a parade and a tattoo. The Maharaja watched with interest the firing of the British artillery.



In the evening, the Maharaja held a grand reception in honour of Lord and Lady Bentinck. The royal tent was decorated with all kinds of glittering stones and tinsel. After some items of music and dance, drinks were served to guests in golden cups. While the courtiers and British officers exchanged courtesies and jokes, the Maharaja took Lord Bentinck to a corner and after a few pleasantries said to him through his interpreter: "According to the treaty made between us, I have the right to extend my territories to the North and the West. I understand your agents are active in the province of Sind." Lord Bentinck answered, "We are only finding the possibilities of trade in Sind and exploring the navigation-route of the Indus river for that purpose. You will agree that the trade over the Indus and Punjab rivers will bring custom duties to us all and will be beneficial to all the parties." The Maharaja did not discuss the matter further because he realised that the British Government had designs for the control of Sind and its commerce.

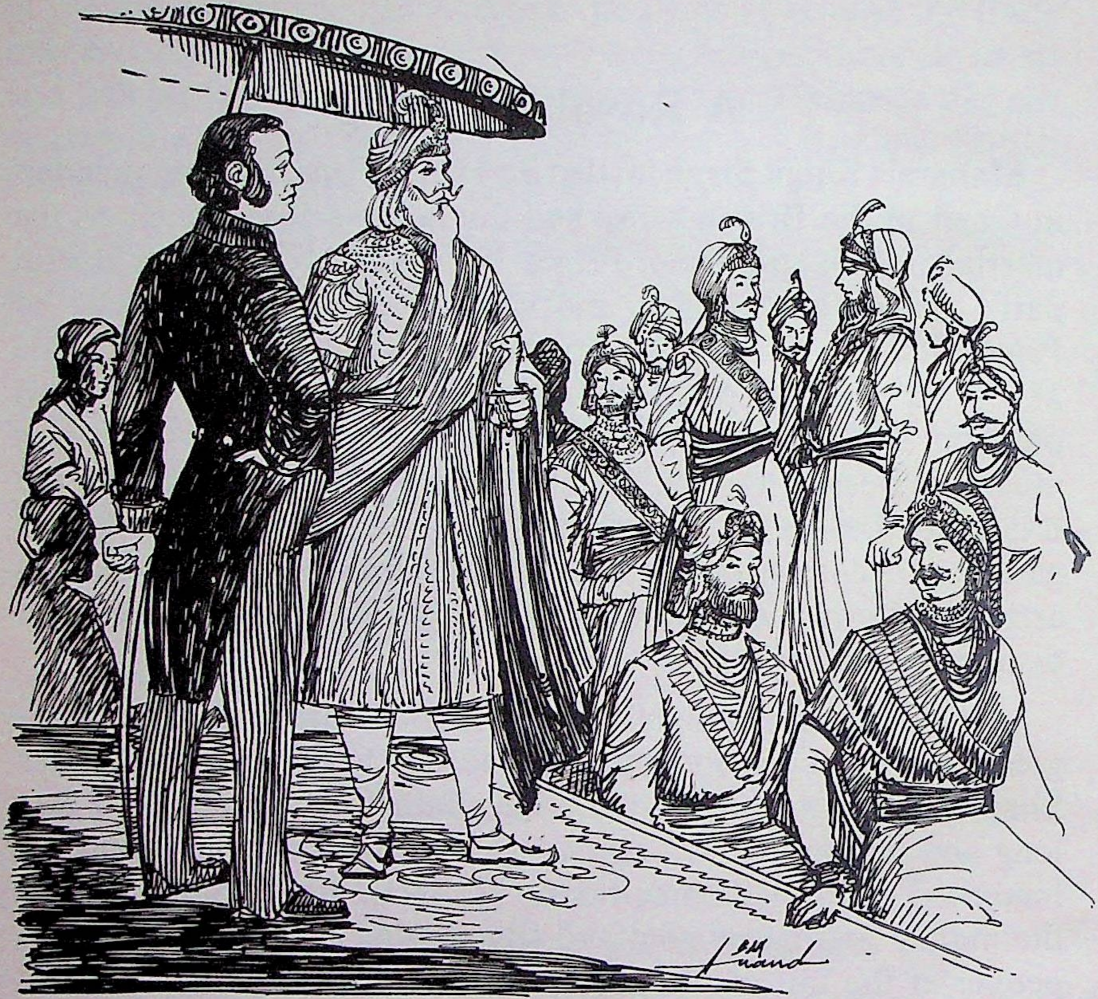
The Rupar Darbar provided frolic and festivity for nearly a week. In between the parades, displays of swordsmanship and musketry were held by both the parties. The Maharaja was lavish in his expenditure and provided every type of amusement for his British guests. Apart from the satisfaction that he derived by giving the British officials a good time, he did not get any concession or commitment from Lord Bentinck beyond the reaffirmation of life-long cordiality and friendship.

A Royal Wedding

Maharaja Ranjit Singh invited Sir Henry Fane, the Commander-in-Chief of the British army and the notable Sikh Chiefs to the marriage of his grandson, Prince Nau Nihal Singh. The British party arrived at Amritsar and was ceremoniously received by Prince Kharag Singh—the bride-groom's father. Next day, the Maharaja welcomed all the guests in a specially decorated pavilion. The British party led by the Commander-in-Chief was much impressed by the jewels worn by the princes and the brocaded dresses of the courtiers. In the afternoon the guests gathered together to offer presents to the bride-groom. Professional artists performed a dance, before the presents were offered and displayed one by one.

In the evening, the marriage procession consisting of the bride-groom, his relatives and guests proceeded to the house of Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala—the bride's father. The procession was long and impressive, led by twenty decorated elephants and six huundred uniformed horse-riders. Maharaja Ranjit Singh rode in the middle and threw gold and silver coins amidst the crowd of people at the tail of the procession. As soon as it reached the bride's house, the guests were seated on cushions in a beautiful and costly tent. The bride-groom removed the veil of strings of pearls covering his face and was then introduced to the bride's relatives.

At night the guests assembled for the marriage ceremony, in the Maharaja's avilion which was lit with costly lamps and filled with the murmur of the water of artificial fountains. The Maharaja wore a green Kashmere dress and a string of pearls. Refreshments were served and thereafter the bride's dowry was displayed. It included eleven elephants, one hundred and one animals including horses,



five hundred Kashmere shawls, gold and diamond ornaments, a silver dinner-set and many household articles. The Maharaja explained the significance of the religious ceremony to the British guests with the aid of interpreters.

The wedding festivities continued for a few days more. During this period, the Maharaja was invited by the Commander-in-Chief to inspect the British troops. The next day, the Maharaja invited the Commander-in-Chief to a display of the feats of the Sikh cavalry. Later on, the guests were shown the royal jewels, including the famous *Kohinoor* diamond.

Fortunately, the Holi festival which occurred during this period added colour and frolic to the wedding festivities. The Maharaja was in really jolly mood. He threw a handful of red powder towards the Afghan ambassador, saying: "Our respected guest will surely like to participate in the fun." Then others sprayed the ambassader with coloured water and roared with laughter. The ambassador was much upset and could hardly do anything to prevent further mischief. After much grinning and giggling when he could. Then the guests started spraying coloured water and powder on their friends, thus providing a lot of fun and frolic. The Maharaja gave presents to all the guests. He awarded the title of the *Star of the Prosperity of the Punjab* to the Commander-in-Chief. Then the guests dispersed, carrying happy memories of this historic event.

The Court of Ranjit Singh

The court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh called *Lahore Durbar* was not only colourful and grand but also different from that of the Mughal rulers. For one thing, the Maharaja did not sit on a throne or wear a crown or any insignia of royalty. He set on a silver chair, dressed in a simple and sober manner. His courtiers sat on cushions placed over carpets in the oriental fashion. He thought of himself as a man of the masses. His authority was derived from his subjects and as such, he never isolated himself from the people.

The Maharaja held his court daily, but on special festivals, pomp and pageantry were prominent. His court was cosmopolitan—his courtiers belonged to different castes, religions and nationalities. The Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims of northern India gave him not only respect but also love. He was their patron, friend, philosopher and guide. His foreign employees were quite loyal to him and respected his sentiments. His court also contained a number of smart young officers whom he often rewarded for their special talent and achievements. The Maharaja's love for children was evident from the fact that some of them played around his court.

The Maharaja's court contained some of the ablest men of the time. He ablest officers were picked up from different communities. Among the Dogra Rajputs, he selected Raja Dhian Singh and Raja Hira Singh Atariwala were his favourites. His two competent ministers—Diwan Mohkam Chand and Diwan Bhawani Das—were Hindus. His Prime Minister was an able Muslim, Fakir Aziz-ud-Din. Once when the latter was asked by a European officer about which eye of the Maharaja was blind, he answered. "The splendour of his face is such that I have never been able to look close enough to discover."

Maharaja Ranjit Singh took personal interest in the career and welfare of his courtiers. His court also contained some of his erstwhile enemies whom he had defeated and yet retained in his service. His humanitarianism enabled him to pardon his foes and also to confer estates and honours on them. By his dignified behaviour and considerate treatment, he won their love and respect. They not only gave him their loyalty but were also ready to die for him. In short, his court consisted of the cream of his age—men inspired with the ideal of serving the common man and looking after the welfare of the Punjab.

Maharaja's Routine

Maharaja Ranjit Singh led a very active and full life. He rose early in the morning and after bathing listened to the recitation of the hymns from *Guru Granth Sahib.* This was done by a Sikh priest who looked after the gurdwara located in his palace. Then he called his ministers and secretaries and discussed state matters related to their respective departments. At about nine in the morning, he would go out for inspection of his troops. He used to hold the court at about eleven. Important visitors and dignitaries would then be presented to him. He would thereafter listen to the final appeals made against the orders of superior judges and ministers. He dictated his orders on the spot and saw to it that they were sealed and soon acted upon. In the afternoon, he would take some rest. In the evening he would enjoy the company of his family and relatives.

Some times, late evening parties were held to which ministers and high officials were invited. There would be lot of feasting and dancing, and sometimes presents were offered to important guests. The Maharaja was in the habit of completing his work before he retired to rest. He preferred sitting up late in the night to complete his work to postponing it to some other day.

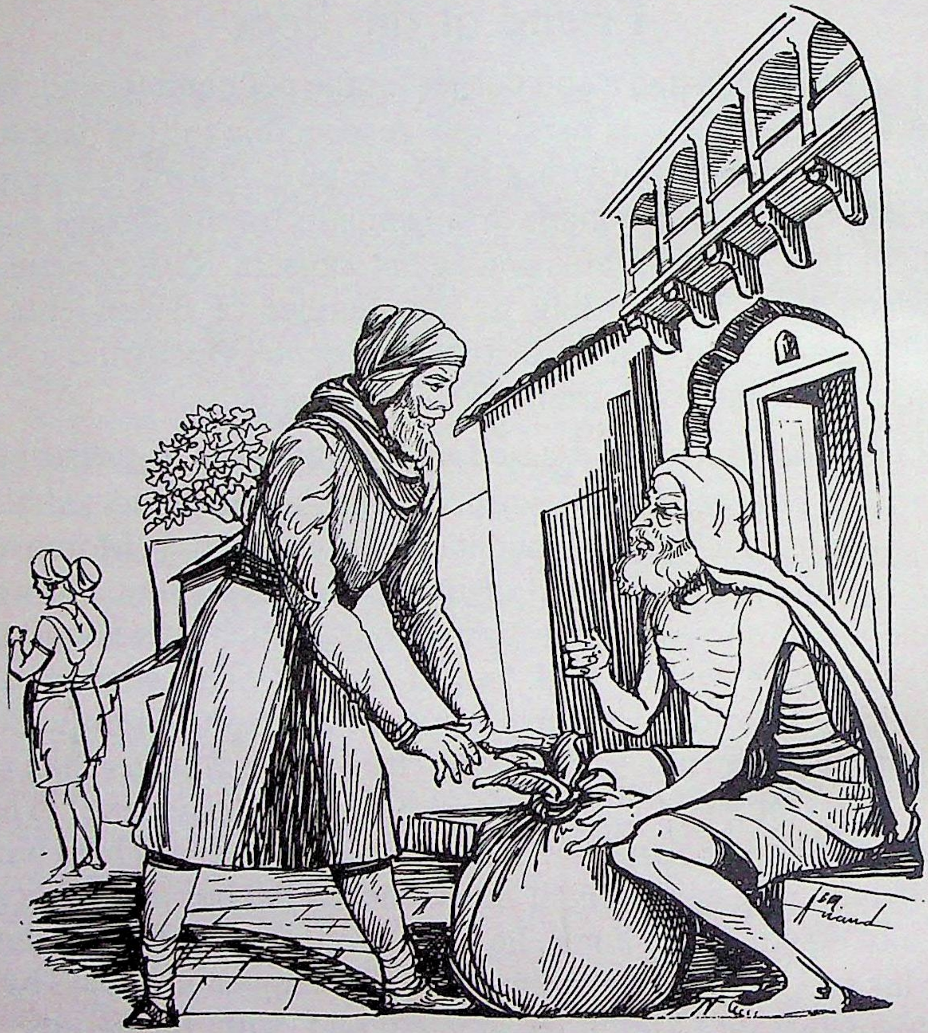
During the celebrations of Sikh religious festivals, the Maharaja spent a lot of time listening to the recitation of *Gurbani* or singing of hymns. Sometimes, he would go to the Golden Temple to join the celebrations. On such occasions he was very liberal in making donations and grants to charitable institutions. He also participated in the festivals of Hindus and Muslims and sometimes paid visits to their holy places. He had great veneration for saintly men of different faiths and often expressed it with great humility.

Friend of the Poor

The Maharaja had a soft corner for the poor and the old. He felt that as a ruler, he was personally responsible for the people who were in any kind of distress in his empire. During the period of famine, the Maharaja made arrangements for the storage and free distribution of food-grains among his subjects. Rations were given to each family according to the number of dependents. The Maharaja used to visit the distribution-centres incognito to satisfy himself that the food-grain reached the poor.

Once the Maharaja dressed as a rustic went to a distribution-centre in Lahore. An old washer-man who had collected his free food-grains in a big bag found it too heavy to carry. Moreover, he had a grandson aged about eight accompanying him. He wanted someone to carry the load to his house which was about a mile away. So he waited and looked around. The Maharaja was watching this old man from a distance. Realising his difficulty, he approached him and said to him, "I am much younger than you. I will carry the bag to your house without any payment." The old man felt happy because he had found a volunteer to help him. So he led the way while Rnajit Singh carried the bag on his back. As the old man reached home, he turned round to thank the volunteer for his assistance. At that time, a soldier happened to pass by, and recognising the Maharaja greeted him with the words, "Jai Sarkar" (Victory to the King). The old man then realised that the volunteer who had carried his bag was the Maharaja himself.

Another incident which shows the Maharaja's concern for poor people is related by his biographer. Once the Maharaja was leading a procession in Lahore, when an old woman approached him. She carried an iron cake-pan, which she rubbed against his legs. On being asked by the Majaraja why she did so, she replied,



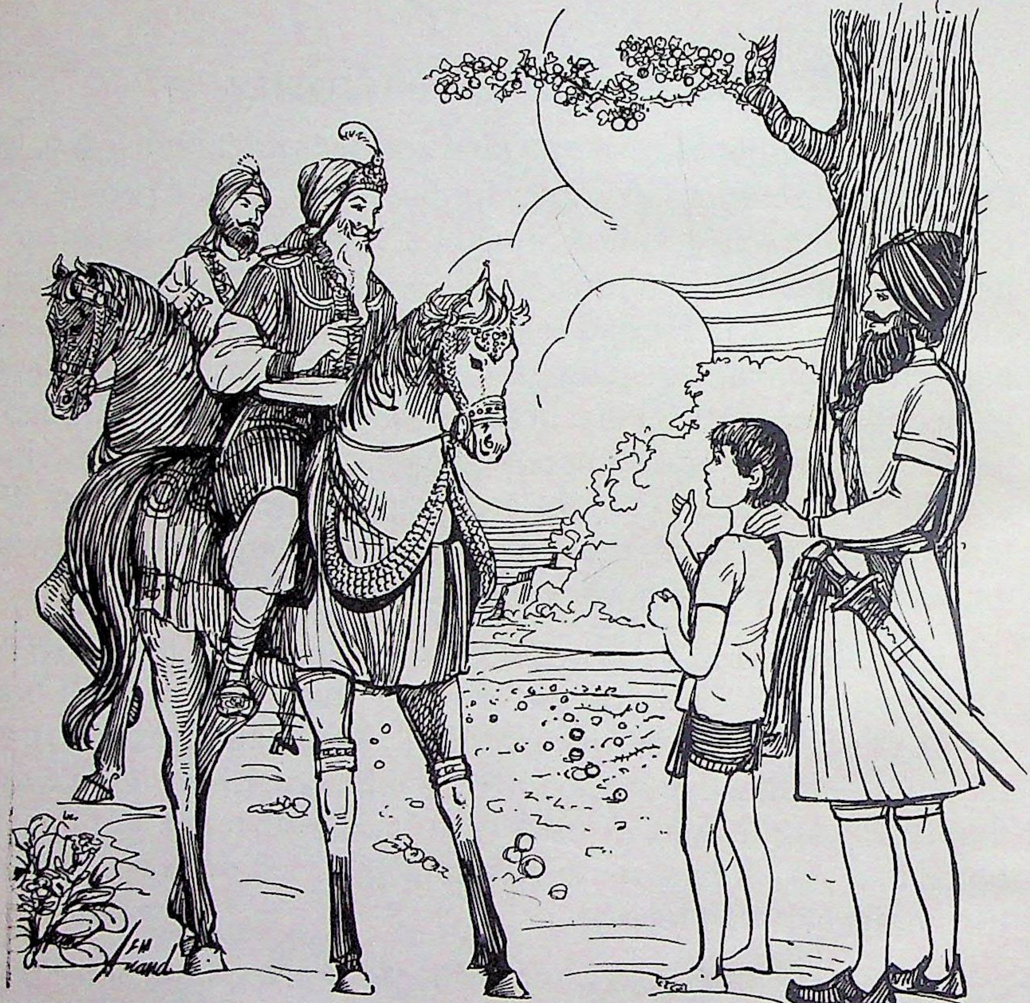
"Sir, people say that your body is *Paras*—the philosopher's stone—which turns iron into gold. I am a poor woman and therefore desired to turn my iron cake-pan into gold by touching your legs." The Maharaja smiled at the simplicity and innocence of the old lady and expressed his sympathy with her lot. He then turned to his secretary and said, "Give her as much gold as the weight of her iron cake-pan." The poor woman shed tears of joy and blessed the Maharaja.

Maharaja's Generosity

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a kind and benevolent ruler. It is said that he gave about a soft corner for poor but talented people. One day a Muslim calligraphist brought a copy of the holy Quran to him. He wanted a good price for his work, as he had spent a lot of time in preparing it. He had been several Muslim rulers, but no one had offered him an adequate return for his labour. The Maharaja respectfully took the holy book in his hands and examined it carefully. He was much impressed with the beautiful handwriting and the binding and asked the calligraphist the price thereof. The latter mentioned a high price and the Maharaja paid him the amount. He kept the book in his private collection.

Subsequently, Fakir Aziz-ud-Din, the Prime Minister, asked the Maharaja, "Why did you pay him so much money for a book which you could not use, being a Sikh?" The Maharaja gave an apt reply: "God intended me to look upon all religions with one eye; that is why He took away the light from the other eye." It may be noted that the Maharaja was referring to his left eye which he had lost in his early childhood.

One day, the Maharaja was passing through a village. Some boys were throwing stones at a berry tree to collect the berries. The boys did not notice that the Maharaja was approaching them. As he was passing, a stone thrown by one of the boys hit him. The Maharaja looked around, and in the meantime, one of his attendants caught the boy. The Maharaja asked the boy, "Why did you throw the stone at me?" The boy answered, "Sir, I did not throw the stone at you. I did not notice that you were passing this way. I threw the stone at the berry tree, which by accident hit you. I, therefore,beg to be excused." The Maharaja questioned the boy further, "What would you have got if your stone had hit the tree?" The boy



replied, "Sir, I would have got a few berries to eat." Then the Maharaja remarked, "Well, I think I can be better than a berry tree. If it can give you a few berries to eat, I can perhaps give you something more valuable." He turned to his secretary and said, "Give the boy as many gold coins as his two hands can hold. He will have some thing to remember and spend for many years of his life." The boy blessed the ruler, for he got a reward instead of punishment.

Exemplary Justice

Maharaja Ranjit Singh did not connive at the excesses committed by his officers and courtiers. He listened to the complaints against them, and dispensed justice without any fear or favour. One day he received a complaint from the family of Said Khan against General Hukma Singh Chimni, the Governor of Attock. The General bore a grudge against Said Khan. Unfortunately the latter committed an offence and in order to take revenge, Hukma Singh sentenced him to death. After his execution the descendents of Said Khan alleged that Hukma Singh had misused his position and given unusually heavy punishment. The Maharaja made personal inquiries and found the complaint to be ture. He dismissed Hukma Singh and fined him over a lakh of rupees. This amount was paid to Said Khan's family as compensation for the improper death sentence.

On another occasion, a resident of Gujranwala made a complaint to the Maharaja against Hari Singh Nalwa. He alleged that he was a neighbour of Nalwa and the latter had encroached upon his land and built an extension on it. The Maharaja made inquiries on the spot and found that the encroachment was illegal. He ordered that the construction be demolished and the land vacated and restored to the complainant.

The land-owners of Rawalpindi region made complaints that one of the revenue officials had made excessive assessments of tax. The Maharaja sent General Ventura to look into the complaints. The latter examined the assessments and decided that the amounts of tax were fair. The landlords were not satisfied with his decision and protested. The Maharaja called them to Lahore and examined the cases carefully. He reduced the amounts of tax in each case and transferred the official who was responsible for making the original decision. The landlords were quite satisfied with the Maharaja's action and expressed their appreciation of his efforts in removing their grievances.

The Maharaja exhorted his officers to give due justice to complainants in cases where the offenders held high positions or were related to ministers or courtiers. Once a peasant made a complaint to Diwan Sawan Mal—the Governor of Multan—that one of the courtiers had fed his horses on his land and destroyed the crops. The man was asked to point out the courtier as he did not know his name. When he pointed out the offender, the person was none other than the Diwan's own son Ramdas. Diwan Sawan mal ordered his son to be arrested and put in prison. When the peasant came to know of the imprisonment of Ramdas, he approached the Diwan to pardon the offender and to release him. The Diwan refused to do so, saying, "How can I deal with offenders when I do not show the courage to punish my own son who has committed a crime ? There will be equal justice for all in the Punjab." The Maharaja was much pleased when he learnt of this incident and expressed his appreciation of the Governor's action.

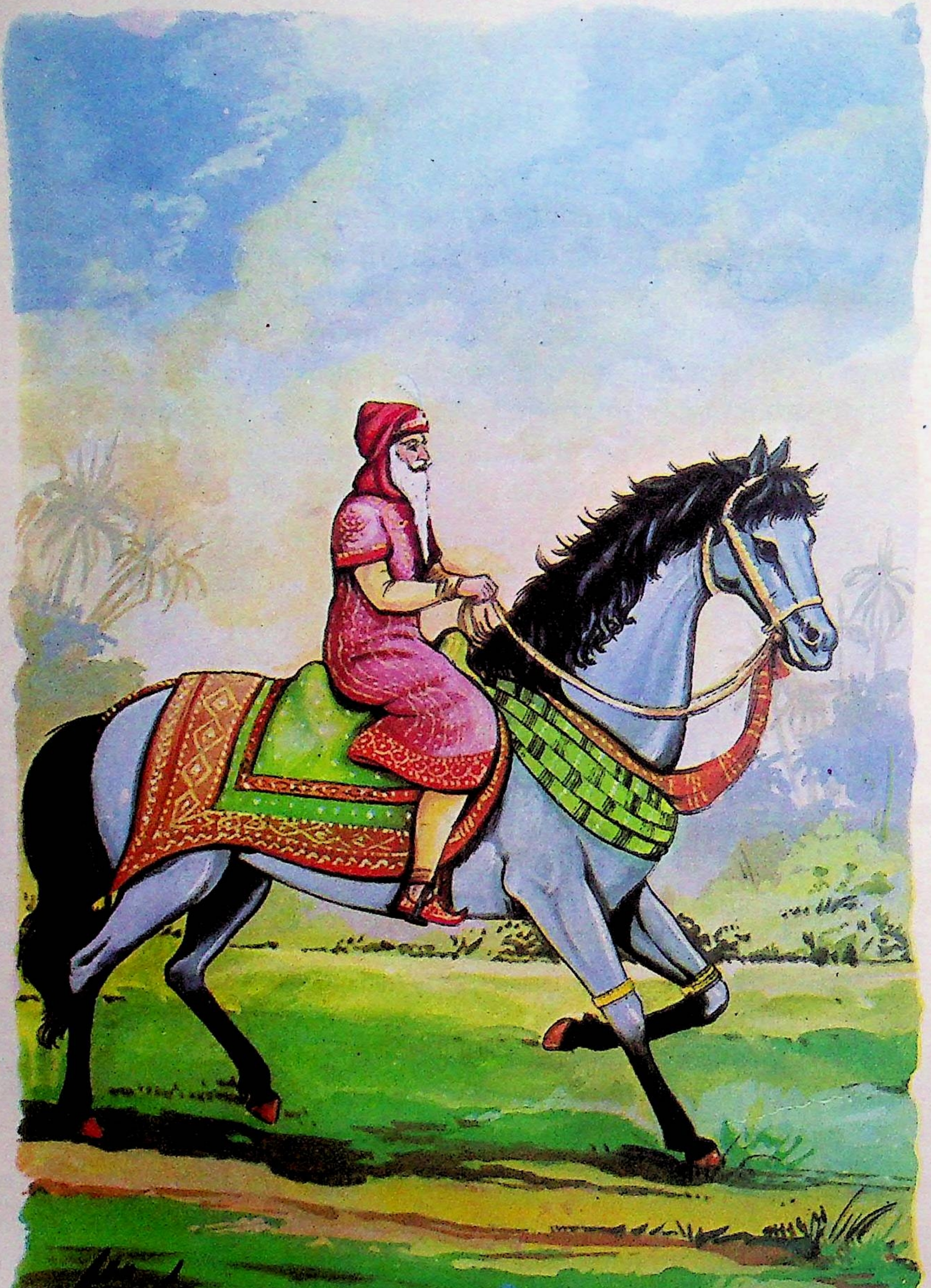
A Faithful Devotee

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a good Sikh. When the Nizam of Hyderabad, Deccan sent him a beautiful canopy as a present, he had a good look at it and decided that it was so grand and splendid that it would be suitable present to the Guru. He said to his secretary, "This majestic canopy befits the throne of Guru Ramdas and must therefore go to the Golden Temple, Amritsar. It will look very beautiful over the Guru and the congregation." This was done. Even today that canopy is spread over *Guru Granth Sahib* on special occasions.

At one time, a suggestion was made to the Maharaja to change the name of Gobindgarh Fort situated near Amritsar, to Ranjitgarh, after his name. The Maharaja declined to do so, affirming, "This fort bears the name of the tenth Guru and must retain that name."

Once a well-known painter went to the Maharaja's court. He requested that he might be allowed to paint a portrait of the ruler. When he was brought to the Maharaja, the latter told him, "I would agree to have my portrait done, provided you do it the way I want it. The painting should show Guru Nanak on a throne and myself prostrated at his feet." The painter replied, "In that position, the Maharaja's face cannot be seen." The Maharaja then agreed to have two paintings—one as mentioned above and the other of Guru Nanak seated on the throne and he standing before him with folded hands. The two paintings were accordingly prepared and hung in the prayer-room of the Maharaja's palace. The painter was amply compensated for his artistic work.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh often took advice from the Sikh scripture whenever he was confronted with a difficult problem. Once Holkar, the Maratha leader fled to Amritsar when he was defeated by British troops under Lord lake. He sought the help of Maharaja



Ranjit Singh in his predicament. Lord Lake requested Ranjit Singh not to help Holkar, as he was an enemy of the British power. The Maharaja was faced with a dilemma. He therefore decided to hold a meeting of Sikh chieftains at Amritsar to solve this problem. The matter was rather complicated. On the one hand, Holkar sought protection of the Sikh community; on the other hand, the British sought an opportunity to attack the Punjab, considering Holkar's issue as very important. At the meeting of the Sikh leaders the Maharaja proposed, "Let us place this matter before the Guru. I shall take two slips of paper, one bearing the name of 'Holkar' and the other of 'Lake'. The slip that gets picked up will decide the side we shall take in this matter." Accordingly, two slips of paper were placed before *Guru Granth Sahib*. The slip that happened to get picked up bore the name 'Lake'. Hence the Maharaja declined to fight with the British rulers. He, however, brought about a settlement between Holkar and the British power. Both the parties were happy with his solution of the problem.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a true and humble servant of the Guru and the Khalsa. Once, as he was about to enter the Golden Temple, he was called upon by Akali Phula Singh to appear at *Akal Takht* to answer an allegation made against him for a breach the Sikh code of conduct. The Maharaja admitted the breach and requested the congregation to impose a penalty on him. Akali Phula Singh consulted the congregation and announced the penalty of twenty one lashes for the Maharaja. The latter accepted the punishment and desired to be whipped after being tied to a tree nearby. Many people gathered on the spot to see this unusual sight.

Akali Phula Singh was overcome by the Maharaja's readiness to abide by the decision of the Sikh community and his humility. He pleaded for the remission of the sentences and a full pardon in view of the fact that the ruler stood tied to the tree to receive the lashing. The congregation accepted his suggestion. The Maharaja was set free and given the Sikh baptism afresh. Thus Ranjit Singh proved to be a good and devoted Sikh of the Guru.

A Secular Monarch

Though Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a Sikh, his government was not a theocracy. It was secular in administration and action. His subjects consisted of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and some minorities. Unlike the Mughal rulers, Ranjit Singh was tolerant and not only allowed freedom of conscience and worship but also donated gifts and estates to temples, mosques and religious centres. He had equal respect for religions other than his own. When some Sikh zealots occupied the Badshahi mosque of Lahore, he got it vacated, and restored it to the trustees of the Muslim community. He assigned land to the tomb of Pir Bahawal Haq for the continuation of the free kitchen for the poor. After the conquest of Peshawar, he granted lands to mosques and Muslim preachers for their maintenance.

Similarly Ranjit Singh did not like that the Central Body of Sikh authority located at Amritsar should dictate to him in the affairs of the State. He, therefore, abolished the tradition of "Gurmatta" in political matters. This was felt necessary to stop the interference of Sikh priests in the exercise of the Maharaja's powers as a secular ruler. Moreover, Ranjit Singh did not like to subordinate any religion under the power of the State; he decided to keep the two apart. He regarded religion as a personal rather than a state affair. In this way, he kept himself away from partisanship in religious controversies of his day.

There is an incident on record which proves Ranjit Singh's impartiality in religious matters. Once some Muslim residents of a village brought a complaint to him that the non-Muslim residents were objecting to the Muslim priests' traditional call for prayers called *"Azan"*. This, according to the Muslims, was a serious interference in their right to worship and religious practice. The Maharaja called the defendents which included Hindus and Sikhs of the village. They said to him, "Sir, under most of the Mughal rulers, we were not allowed to worship and sing in our temples. Why not pay the Muslims in the same coin under Sikh rule?" The Maharaja replied, "Two wrongs do not make a right. Moreover, mine is not the Sikh rule, it is a secular government. For us, Punjab comes first and not any particular religion. All communities have equal rights in my State."

Then the non-Muslims raised another objection, saying, "The loud prayer-calls made by the Muslim priest five times a day disturb us; it is a nuisance which we cannot stand." The Maharaja retorted, "Will you take upon yourselves the duty of informing all the Muslims living in the village five times every day that it is the time for offering prayers. After all, the *Mullah* does precisely this when he shouts aloud calling the Muslims to prayers." The non-Muslims looked at one another and expressed their inablity to do so every day. Then the Maharaja said,"If you cannot inform them, the *Mullah* will continue to call them in the usual manner." Thus the Maharaja brought understanding between the communities which lived in peace thereafter.

Moreover, the Maharaja's encouragement of education on liberal lines bore good results. He helped all types of educational institutions run by different communities in Lahore. The *Madrasa* of Mian Wadda where a large number of the children of his employees studied received liberal grants. The Maharaja granted scholarships to young boys who joined the Christian Missionary School at Ludhiana in order to acquire modern education. He even welcomed the idea of the establishment of a Christian mission school at Lahore, but when the management insisted on making Bible study compulsory for students, he turned it down.

The secularism of Ranjit Singh is evident from the fact that he made Lahore his capital and not Amritsar. He also treated the leaders of different religious communities with due courtesy and consideration.

A Great Nation Builder

Maharaja Ranjit Singh enjoys the reputation of being a remarkable nation builder. He brought together a number of chiefs and communities under the banner of Greater Punjab. With the capture of the north-west frontier region and Kashmir, his empire extended from Khyber in the north to Rupar in the South. It was for the first time in eight hundred years that a united Punjab was ruled by a man of the soil.

Moreover, the new state was held together, by the ideal of patriotism and a common goal. Though it was known as *Sarkar Khalsa* or *Lahore Durbar,* employment opportunities both in army and civil services were open to members of all the communities living therein. Burnes, the British agent, was amazed by the small number of the Sikh population and officers—less than one-third of the total and noted the fact that the Punjab was not a Sikh state but Punjabi State, belonging to all the sections of the people living therein. No disabilities were imposed on any section of the population and that is why all the people gave their ruler both respect and affection.

The Maharaja brought harmony between the Punjabi and the Pathans by settling Sikh families in the frontier districts. The Punjabis lived on terms of equality and friendship with the Pathans, and the latter often left their families under the care of Punjabis, when they went out of town or village for long periods. Undoubtedly the mild treatment of all the communities proved to be a source of strength to the Maharaja. He showed the way of cooperation and understanding by which the different communities with varied cultural backgrounds and religious practices could live peacefully in a united Punjab.

The Maharaja encouraged industries in the Punjab—which is mainly an agricultural region. He set up factories for the manufacture of arms and ammunition in Lahore. The Shawl industry was revived in the frontier region. New industries were set up in Multan and Hazara districts.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a great national hero. He did not neglect the code of ethics in times of trouble or war. His reign was free from cruelty and exploitation. He issued the following order to his army: "Do not molest women and children. Do not attack religious places or charitable institutions and do not show disrespect to the holy books of the enemy." His benevolent rule—a contrast to that of the earlier Muslim rulers—was a surprise to European travellers. Von Hugel observed, "Punjab was even safer than Hindustan, then under British rule."

The Last Speech

Early in June 1839, Maharaja Ranjit Singh fell seriously ill. He suffered from high fever accompanied by a stroke of paralysis. In spite of the prayers of priests and leaders of different communities, his health continued to deteriorate. He ordered a large quantity of food-grains, cash and jewels and when brought to his presence, directed that all the things be given away in charity. Next day, he called his courtiers and distributed among them his favourite weapons—swords, pistols and spears. They received these parting gifts with tears in their eyes. He also expressed a desire to give away in charity his most precious diamond—the *Kohinoor*—but he was dissuaded from doing so. He however, announced a grant of land for the Golden Temple, Amritsar.

Then, in a low and faint voice, he made a speech to those around him, the substance of which was as under: "My friends and countrymen ! I have but a few more minutes to live. Remember that every one who is born must die. Do not mourn my death, because it is ordained by the Will of God. With His Grace, I have been able to complete the task of unifying the different regions of the Punjab into a powerful State. You must all remain united or you will perish at the hands of your enemies. Promise me on my death-bed that you will all work together, hand in hand, for the prosperity of the Punjab. The land of the five rivers needs your helping hands and dedication. Remember the two things which Guru Gobind Singh gave the people—nectar and sword. Nectar stands for sweetness and co-operation; the sword represents courage and sacrifice necessary to maintain your ideals. Let the sword be ready to destroy the tyrant and the wicked. Guard your heritage and your freedom, and this will be your greatest gift and blessing to me."

Then the Maharaja nominated Prince Kharag Singh as his successor. Soon after the brief ceremony of succession, the Maharaja fell into a coma. The end came on 27th June, 1839.

The death of Ranjit Singh cast a shadow of gloom over the Punjab. As his body lay in state, safety-precautions were taken immediately throughout the empire. The stores and treasury at Lahore were kept under strict guard. The cremation took place on the next day.

The whole of the Punjab remained in a state of mourning for many days. People remembered the good and benevolent actions of their ruler and felt as if they had lost a family member. Maharaja Ranjit Singh died about one hundred and fifty years ago, but his memory lives in the tales and songs of the people of the Punjab because he was their beloved hero. Ranjit Singh has found a place of honour in history as a great king and warrior of India.

THE STORY
OF MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

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